

LESSON FOUR: FORMING A THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING

When thinking about a theology of suffering, the main question is whether or not we have one that is biblically accurate and coherent as possible.

Today we will examine 4 precepts of suffering. These precepts form the underlying truths that help us make sense of suffering. They are biblically bound, governing principles that give us a theology of suffering.

PRECEPT #1: EVERYONE WILL SUFFER

No one is exempt from pain; it is the common denominator for all of us. As members of the human race, we all experience suffering.

The belief that a Christian will not or should not suffer is inconsistent with biblical teaching. As we find in scripture, God allowed Job to experience seemingly unjustified misery. In the same way, many prophets and apostles were subjected to emotional and physical abuse and even death. And Jesus Himself endured substantial mistreatment. For the Christian, suffering is not an unusual experience, everyone suffers.

PRECEPT #2: ALL SUFFERING HAS MEANING

Suffering is not accidental or random. It is allowed by God because suffering is purposeful. Thus, our responses to it are very important.

Think of training athletes. They push their bodies to the brink because they know that there is no way to develop muscles without experiencing pain. The same is true of suffering. We do not covet it, but it exercises our mental, emotional, spiritual, and theological muscles. Suffering can deepen our relationship with God.

Most of our struggles are due, in part to our inability to make sense of difficult situations, trials, or adversities. That is, the real anguish of suffering is due to perceived meaninglessness.

PRECEPT #3: GOD IS NOT OBLIGATED TO PROVIDE AN ALL-INCLUSIVE ANSWER ABOUT SUFFERING

There are no pat answers when it comes to pain and suffering. There is not one verse in the bible that completely and fully explains God's purpose for suffering. Some Christians attempt to explain suffering by attributing it to sin, lack of faith,

or some other cause. However, the beginning of understanding suffering is the acceptance that we will not always understand it.

PRECEPT #4: GOD KNOWS OUR PAIN AND IS WITH US WHEN WE SUFFER

FOOTPRINTS IN THE SAND

One night I dreamed a dream.
As I was walking along the beach with my Lord.
Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life.
For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand,
One belonging to me and one to my Lord.

After the last scene of my life flashed before me,
I looked back at the footprints in the sand.
I noticed that at many times along the path of my life,
especially at the very lowest and saddest times,
there was only one set of footprints.

This really troubled me, so I asked the Lord about it.
"Lord, you said once I decided to follow you,
You'd walk with me all the way.
But I noticed that during the saddest and most troublesome times of my life,
there was only one set of footprints.
I don't understand why, when I needed You the most, You would leave me."

He whispered, "My precious child, I love you and will never leave you
Never, ever, during your trials and testings.
When you saw only one set of footprints,
It was then that I carried you."