

## LVIII. Timeless Truth for Timely Topics in Biblical Perspective

*What Does the Bible Say?*

“The Christian and Suffering”

Selected Texts

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We will start by looking at James 1 as we look at this issue of the Christian and suffering. I wanted to let you know why this issue was on my heart. I have been through a number of issues this last year which include the death of my sister, open heart surgery and some other issues and that certainly has given me some sensitivity to the issue but that wouldn't necessarily motivate me to preach on this because I have been such a great beneficiary of this church's ministry during this time. I'm astonished at your Christian charity, persistence, and thoughtfulness during a time of personal suffering in my own life and working through it as well as my family. My point on this sermon is twofold. One is how we deal with a Christian perspective on suffering and secondly how we respond in ministry to those who are suffering. These two need more than this one study so I would recommend R.C. Sproul's series titled “Surprised by Suffering” which would bring even more value to this topic. Another thing I'd recommend is a book titled The Gospel According to Job written by Mike Mason which I think you'd find extremely helpful as well.

In this study I will at least give us a foundation on this matter with some maxims about our perspective on suffering, how we respond to suffering and others who are suffering. I plan to do a distillation of seven basic principles from a number of passages of Scripture that we will look at first. We'll start by looking at James 1. James 1:2–6 says [2] *Count it all joy, my brothers, **when** (not if) you meet trials of various kinds, [3] for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. [4] And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect (matured) and complete, lacking in nothing.*

*[5] If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. [6] But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.*

I Corinthians 10:12–13 says [12] *Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. [13] No temptation (or testing) has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.* With endurance comes steadfastness and with steadfastness comes hope and that is a promise of the Lord in this matter of testing.

Now let's look at I Thessalonians. Here is a church that was under testing of state persecution whereby some were losing their life for Christ and they wanted Paul to give them some wisdom in this regard. I Thessalonians 1:2–10 says [2] *We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, [3] remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. [4] For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, [5] because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. [6] And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word **in much affliction**, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, [7] **so that you became an example** to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. [8] For not*

*only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. [9] For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, [10] and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*

Here they are enduring under this present local wrath and they are manifesting the power of God's grace that also delivers from the wrath to come. It's so powerful what is happening in their life that it is causing other people to talk about it. Paul is basically saying they go to places to preach and they don't have to say a word because the report of our Gospel and what it does in your life has already gone out to them. They have already heard it and they are responding to it. Therefore the glorious statement of the Gospel is being displayed by how they are handling the affliction that they are under. Now let's look at what Paul says about himself.

I Thessalonians 2:1–16 says *[1] For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. [2] But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. [3] For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, [4] but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. (This that we've been through places the stamp of God's approval before you by the way He brings us through it to encourage you and equip you and all the while God is still working on us for He is testing our hearts with these afflictions.) [5] For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. [6] Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. [7] But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. [8] So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.*

*[9] For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. [10] You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. [11] For you know how, like a father with his children, [12] we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.*

*[13] And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. [14] For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, [15] who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind [16] by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last!*

I Peter 3:13–20 says *[13] Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? [14] But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, **you will be blessed.** Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, [15] but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, [16] having a good conscience, so that, when you are*

*slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. [17] For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.*

*[18] For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, [19] in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, [20] because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.*

Here is one final text. Most of what the texts I've been reading have been about testing and that is what suffering is. Suffering is a subset of testing. I Peter 4:12–19 says *[12] Beloved (children of the Lord), do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. [13] But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.* (His glory is revealed when we go through suffering.) *[14] If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. [15] But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. [16] Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. [17] For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?*

*[18] And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" [19] Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.*

I think these texts are crucial for this distillation. As Christians when we're dealing with suffering there is physical suffering, emotional suffering, the suffering of persecution, marginalization, etc. There is all kinds of suffering that can come into the life of a believer. I'm not trying to handle this as a philosopher, psychologist or doctor because I am not qualified. I'm simply a pastor trying to address this issue from a Christian world and life view, not if but when it comes in your life. We are in the process of this as God is maturing us therefore testing is going to be one of His instruments in His arsenal. That testing may include its subset of suffering in terms of what He is doing in our life.

We live in a broken world and everything is not right. Our God has done a glorious work so that we are now in Christ. We are declared perfect in Christ and we are moving toward the perfections of a new heavens and a new earth but we are not yet there. We are now secured in Christ but are not yet delivered into that glorious moment. So while we are not in the 'not yet' what is it from the now that Christ has done that will equip us to go through this 'not yet' broken season of a world that knows the tragedy of sin and rebellion against God, His consequences and the collateral over flow under the sovereign God can even touch us in our lives. So how should we see it, respond to it and deal with it?

As a pastor in pastoral counseling I am constantly dealing with brothers and sisters in the Lord who are facing suffering. This last week I went to the hospital on Saturday to visit with some people. We have this man on our staff who is absolutely astounding with pastoral visits in the hospital and his name is Mark Cushman. Along with other staff we'll go and support in these visits but most people who see me at the hospital think 'Oh no, I didn't think I was doing that bad. I thought I was doing pretty good, what are you doing here?' But this last time I went there was various suffering physically, emotionally and spiritually at that moment in various ways. People suffer when they get bad news, in crisis, with diagnosis, with prognosis, with family issues, when children or parents are suffering.

Almost always when suffering comes there are two questions that are invariably asked. One question that usually comes in the life of a believer when suffering comes is, where is God? Why is this in my life? I thought God loved me so where is God? The short answer is He is right with you. He is the fourth man in the fire. Yes we have a God who periodically will prevent the fire and will blow out the fire but you have a God that not only designs the fire and the dross to consume but you have a God who is in the fire with you. At the cross He went through the fire of hell for you and that's who is there with you.

The second question that is invariably asked when suffering comes is, why? We all ask it. I've been asking with the home going of my sister and God has allowed me to see some of the why but what really astounds me is when professing unbelievers will ask me 'if there's a God why is there suffering?' I will ask them in response 'I gather from your question you don't think there's a God?' Their answer is 'no' and my response to that is 'then why do you care about suffering?' Do you know why we say, where's God? We say it because we're made in the image of God. The unbeliever who asks this question betrays the inadequacies of their world and life view that there is no God. Their world and life view is called Darwinian evolution which is survival of the fittest. Actually suffering is a part of the survival of the fittest, isn't it? So why should they be upset at suffering because it's just nature perfecting itself, isn't it? In their world and life view suffering should actually be seen as a value. The inadequate are being weeded out through suffering. They know that's not true and that is why they ask me that question.

The other reason this question is asked is because you know it wasn't intended to be this way in the creation. That means I get the opportunity to tell you why it's this way. It is this way because a sovereign God has appointed the reality of our rebellion against God and in our rebellion against God we bring the brokenness and the curse of sin. Now that is not out of God's sovereign control because we have sinned. There are things about God you would have never have known without us rebelling against Him. So couldn't God have prevented us from sinning? This question begs the question as to why would He have prevented us from sinning. There are a lot of answer around that which have to do with being a free moral agent and the creation of Adam and Eve and all that but I don't have time to deal with all that.

Let me just say there are whole dynamics to God's glory we would never know without the reality of our rebellion and sin. You would never know that God is a God of grace. We sing the song Amazing Grace and angels can mimic that song but can't sing it from the heart because they have never sinned. We sing it from the heart because God's grace is greater than our sin. Now you see the majesty of God's grace that you would have never seen without our sin so God is sovereignly using it but the reason things are broken is because of our sin which brings the curse of brokenness. We know it ought not to be like that.

That means there is coming a day that it won't be like that. It's called the new heavens and the new earth. We read about it in Revelation 20 and 21. That is a day where there is no brokenness, suffering, or even the ability to sin that brings the suffering in that day. I want you to be in that day but to be in that day you have to meet the One who came into our suffering and suffered to redeem us. He brought us to our sins to bring Himself to us to be our Savior by His grace which is greater than our sin. You ask this question because you know your world and life view is a fabrication. You are not a grown up, mutated, survival of the fittest, accidental act of a germ that came up from a cesspool and you don't even know where the germ in the cesspool came from. You know that is inadequate and that is why you are asking the question you are asking. We also ask the question, God why?

I want to give you seven things about this to think about and then a brief exhortation as to how we deal with it distilling from the passages we looked at earlier. The first thing is suffering is a divinely appointed testing experience in our life. When Peter and Paul speak of suffering in their writings they speak of it as a test from God. When tests come God is sovereignly in control and one of the reasons He allows the test to come is because it has a whole dynamic to it. Suffering is a subset of the divinely appointed use of testing in a broken world from God. So don't be surprised at the fiery ordeal. When Paul refers to the fiery ordeal he is talking about the saints in Rome. This is around the time where Nero used Christians as scape goats. He laughs at their statement 'we are the light of the world.' He feeds them to lions, impales them on stakes as he pours tar on them with a sign that says 'you are the light of the world' and then lights them. Other saints who died in a fiery ordeal were Latimer, Ridley, Cranmer, Tyndale and other reformers. This is a testing instrument in the hand of God that has multiple purposes. This leads us to the second thing.

The second thing is that it is a teaching experience. A test teaches us and I like to use this illustration of my algebra test. By the way, as long as there are algebra tests in school there will be prayer in school. I was convinced that my algebra teacher gave tests to torture, ridicule and shame me but that wasn't her reasons. A test does three things. One it shows you what you know. Two it shows you what you don't know and three it shows you what you need to know. It is a teaching tool so God in times of suffering is teaching us. It is a teaching experience that is divinely appointed with a positive purpose because it shows us what we know and sometimes it shows us that what we think we know is not the right thing to know. Like in an algebra test where you thought you had the right formula for the problem but got the problem wrong because you found out your formula was wrong.

Many times I will pray before we go into the Word that God will affirm what we know is true, eradicate what we think we know that's not true. There are so many false teachers and preachers who are teaching things falsely and deceiving God's people by doing so. One of the ways God eradicates this false teaching is when He takes you through testing and teaching experiences of suffering. The fact that you believe in Jesus does not always mean that you will be healthy, wealthy and wise the rest of your life. There is not a name it and claim it, blab it and grab it or confess it and possess it. That word of faith teaching is wrong. Does it have an element of truth that it draws upon? Yes, but it is wrong. I have seen those who have multiplied their suffering because they thought it was right and therefore how did they deal with their suffering.

One of the most difficult moments in my life was my first funeral as a pastor. He was a young man who was 24 years of age. I had the privilege to marry him and his beautiful bride. As he was fighting cancer we would pray and I told him God may intervene with a perfect healing there, now He may intervene with a perfect healing to take him to glory or He may intervene with a prolong establishing of you for I can't answer that but let's look to the Lord for His perfect answer. God did extend his life for a while but eventually he went to be with the Lord. The difficult moment came when I went to his hospital room where he was only hours away from facing Jesus and a preacher had come in unbeknownst shouting things over him and telling him 'all you have to do is claim this if you believe enough you'll get up and walk out of this bed.'

At that time I was 28 years old and there was some maturing yet that needed to take place in my life where I didn't gently take this preacher out the room but I literally took him out of the room, not so gently. My heart was pained because here was a man I loved dearly, gone to

college with, has pastored him and his bride and walked through these things with him. Here he is about to step into eternity and his only hope is that he is saved by faith with a man trying to tell him he doesn't have enough faith to get rid of some cancer. It was not only blasphemous but horrendous. Yet how many people believe this word of faith teaching for we see how popular it is on TV. Sometimes God uses the suffering so we see what we know is not accurate, not true as well as what we know is true as He is teaching us.

Thirdly, suffering is a refining experience in which suffering gets rid of the wood, hay and stubble in our life. Peter calls suffering the refiner's fire. It burns the dross out of the pot of gold. You put the heat to the gold and whatever impurities are there rises to the top and you scrape it off. There are things in our life that just don't need to be there and in suffering we see pretty quickly that certain things aren't as important as we think it was. It can even reveal some hidden idols and pockets of poison in our heart and life.

Fourthly, suffering is a learning experience. Not only is God affirming what we know is true, correcting in our life what we thought was true, revealing to us what we don't yet know but teaching us so that we are learning what we need to know. There are times in our life where things are just going so wonderfully and this is not superstition but I'll be talking with someone and say 'Things are going so great and I praise the Lord but I'm scared to enjoy it too much thinking what is going to happen next.' The reason I say that is invariably I have noticed that on the heels of the blessings of God come the challenges of God to prepare you for the next opportunity for God and blessings that He is bringing. So as He is teaching us, refining us and learning in this suffering He is informing you of why and how He has blessed you, preparing you for what is to come and the challenge that is coming.

Do you think the way Jesus dealt with Peter is any accident? Peter is walking on the water and starts sinking. He tells him to get behind Him Satan. He told Peter he had his nets on the wrong side of the boat. Later He basically tells Peter that He is breaking him, making him and molding him because there will come a day where Peter will preach and 3,000 will come to Jesus. Peter needs to see that day rightly and be ready for that day. This is the very man that would run away from a milk maid, servant and Roman centurion and a few days later say 'This Man whom you have crucified is Jesus who is Lord and Savior.' Jesus took him through suffering to show him his frailties and faults to make and prepare him ready to preach and thousands would come to Christ. So He is also working in our souls where we begin to seek Him more than anything else. It's in the midst of suffering that Jesus becomes so dear to us. I don't think this happens but it's almost as if we pray 'God, can you relieve this suffering?' and God says 'I'm about to but I don't really want to because I probably won't hear from you again for a long time' but in the suffering we flee to Him and come to Him.

There is coming the ultimate test when we go through the valley of the shadow of death and the suffering we are going through now that is measured will prepare us for that day and as your days are so shall your strength be. Suffering is not only a subset of testing but He will not let you be tested beyond what you are able but He will always make the way of escape. Ultimately He is preparing you for the final testing when we step into His presence. We do not go through death but the valley of the shadow of death and He has already taught us of His sufficiency through our suffering in this life so that on that day we will be ready to meet Him. It is suffering grace that prepares us for the day of dying grace that we might come into His presence. Why?

Fifthly suffering is a trusting experience. In suffering we finally just have to put our trust in the Lord. I don't see all the whys and I don't have all the answers so this is where I confess to

you that I'm preaching so hard to myself. I am a person who loves to investigate every possibility of why something should happen, could happen or how it happens for that's just the way my mind works. But there are moments in my life and suffering where God will give me a few of the answers but not all the answers. Suffering is the area that the Puritans call the 'hard Providence' of God. It's still a good providence of God but it's a hard one. I use this illustration because it is the best I have for this.

I remember a time when it seemed like everyone was doing needlepoint. My wife got into needlepointing and I would go over to look at the needlepoint as she would say 'what do you think?' I would respond by saying 'it looks like a mess to me' because I was only looking at the back side of it. Now on the back side where threads of different colors were going everywhere I could make out that there was some kind of pattern on the other side but I could not tell what it was or totally appreciate it. My wife would look at me with great pity and turn it around so I could see it. Then I'd say 'Oh, that's pretty!' That is what God does.

In His hard providence you are looking at the back side of the needlepoint. You know He is doing something. You've been taught He is doing something and you have the perspective it is not an accident that is beyond Him but He is divinely working in your life. Every once in a while on this side of eternity He will flip it around and let you see something He is doing as you're trusting Him to increase your trust in Him. He did that for me on the passing of one of my sisters and how God used that to bring another sister to Christ. Ultimately when you get to heaven you'll be amazed at the picture on the other side of how God used that hard providence for His glory, your good and what He did in the lives of other people as well through it. It will be amazing and astounding.

I can show you this as I share my own conversion. A man lost his 39 year old wife with four girls to raise. I came to him and said 'Jimmy, I don't know what to do for I'm kinda new at this church stuff.' He said 'Harry, if I could bring her back I wouldn't do it.' I didn't have a category for that response so I said 'We're ya'll having trouble?' He said 'Oh no, we have known each other since we were 14 and been married since we were 18, I just don't know how I'm going to raise these four girls. Here is what I know. Do you know what she has, why would I take her from that? Two, God is sovereign, this is tough – losing my wife at a Christmas day dinner with a cerebral hemorrhage with four girls, but I know He doesn't make mistakes. He never told me all things are good but that all things will work together for good. And it won't be that long till I'll be there with her.' That is what led me to Christ. The things I learned from him was I don't always know what God was doing in it but I know God has a plan. It is hard providence but good providence and it won't be that much longer.

Then 22 years later Briarwood Presbyterian sent me to plant a church in Charlotte, North Carolina. My first Sunday night to preach I shared my testimony and the extended version of my testimony that I just briefly shared with you. Three girls are in the back and won't let me see them. As soon as the service was over I went after them. When I got to them one said 'Do you recognize me?' and I said 'I think so.' She said 'I'm Jane and I have been angry at God ever since He took my mother but I told Him that if He could ever show me anything that gives me some sense out of it then I would come to Him.' One of the four sisters had already come to Christ and now the other three of them came to Christ from a testimony about it in a trailer on a Sunday night where I had been sent from this church to plant a church there. Those ladies then went out to help us plant daughter churches. Every once in a while God will flip it around and let you see what He is doing. It's amazing what all He is doing. She has gotten to see a taste of what God had done in her mother's death to bring others to Christ.

Sixthly, suffering is a recalibrating experience. Suffering gets you disconnected from the things of this world and connected to Jesus. It recalibrates you in life and for eternity. It tells you where your real hope is. Suffering loosens our grip here and increases His grip upon us for there when we shall be with Him. It recalibrates us in this life so we are fixed upon Him and not upon circumstances. You know the old statement – ‘How are you doing?’ ‘Pretty good under the circumstances.’ ‘Well, what are you doing there?’ God says He’ll make us more than an overcomer but we have to stay fixed on Him in life and what is worth in this life is knowing Him and when you know Him the best is yet to come. What is here are multiple blessings but you can’t put them in the place of God. If you take the blessings of God in this life and make them more important, then the blessing of God with your life just becomes an idol, even the blessings of God.

Seventhly, use suffering as an opportunity experience. It said several times in the texts I read that our suffering brings glory to God and the proclamation of the Gospel to others. Suffering becomes a platform whereby men and women can only explain what God is doing in their life in the midst of suffering for His glory. Suffering becomes our witness platform to the glory of Christ and the glory of eternity. It becomes the moment where we define and display to a watching world because when we’re going through suffering the world is looking at us like never before. It doesn’t mean we go through suffering with a plastic smile. No, Paul never said ‘don’t grieve’ he just says don’t grieve as those with no hope. In suffering we are sitting in the school of God’s providence and He is instructing our heart to look to Him. When that happens the world watches and that becomes a platform for us to tell them about Jesus.

So how do we minister to people who are suffering? Focus relationally and not informationally. Please don’t come into someone’s life who is suffering and start sloganeering with Christian slogans that are supposed to help them through it. Just come love them. Weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. I’m not saying don’t speak to them for there will come a time to speak but when they are suffering just come in, person to person, love them and not focused upon giving them information.

Come into their life with the ministry of presence and not so quickly with the ministry of proclamation or precepts. Be with them and that’s why I recommend reading the book of Job. Job’s friends said a lot of good things they just said them at the wrong time. That’s why he said what he did in Job 6:26, [26] *Do you intend to reprove my words, when the words of one in despair (grief) belong to the wind?* Just be here with me right now.

Focus conversationally and not on declaration. Don’t declare to people how they ought to be going through that suffering. The best way to come in conversationally is to come in with questions. How are you? How can I help you? I want to love you, tell me how I can. Saturate your relational presence and conversation with them with prayer, always asking God for wisdom that we lack so you will know how to respond to them. If you do this there will come a time that they will then begin to ask you some questions and then you can share with them the truth of God’s Word. At that moment the door is opened. You have relationally and conversationally wrapped them up physically, emotionally, verbally and spiritually. Then when they turn to you knowing they can trust you in the agonies of their soul, you can share with them with wisdom from above. God, help me know what to say and how to say it.

Those are some basic thoughts on suffering and remember your God has suffered for you. Praise His Name forever more and in your suffering He is there. Let’s pray.

Prayer:



Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. Thank You for allowing us to walk through this pretty big subject of suffering and the patience of those who desire to get their arms around it. I bring this not so much in concern of how this church has ministered in suffering but I bring it more so that they can simply grow. I bring it also because I know we're all going to face suffering in this world and we're not to be surprised at that but we are to be ready to give an account of the hope that is within us, even from the platform of suffering. Help us to love each other well at those moments and help the world to see the love of Christ in us for we suffer, not as the world but we suffer as Christians. Christ is our Hope, in Jesus' Name, Amen.