**Suffering: How a Good God Allows It and It’s Purpose**

**Prodigal Message 14**

**Weekly Scripture memory verse:**

**Psalm 119:71 *“It was good for me to be afflicted, so that I might learn your decrees”***

*The first time I met Angie, she was telling her story in Newcomer group the first night she came. I was riveted as she described why she came to the ministry and why she was at the end of her rope. Her 20 year old son, Brandon, had been attending Blinn college but heroin addiction had caused him to enter rehab several weeks before and he had just been released and was living at home trying to get his feet under him. The prior week she noted that he had been angry and when he couldn’t be reached she felt God telling her something was wrong, terribly wrong. Fearing the worst, she tracked his credit card to a local hotel. Racing there, she found out what room he was in. After no response, she broke into the room to find him overdosed and barely alive. The paramedics gave him a narcotic antidote and rushed him to the hospital, saving his life. I knew it would be a unique challenge for this woman to ever let go and give her son to God after experiencing that nightmare.*

*However Angie was faithful to attend Prodigal and began to realize the Bible’s wisdom spoke truth into her chaos. Through her journey Ginny and I became friends with Angie, like we do to so many participants in Prodigal. I finally met Brandon in 2014 and I would have never guessed this could be the same rebellious prodigal boy I had heard about for so long. Handsome, bright, and polite, he was honest about his struggle as we spoke. He seemed optimistic but realistic about his fight with addiction. I really liked him. Ginny and I prayed for he and his family regularly. Less than a year later, I spoke at his funeral, after he had been found dead in a friend’s apartment, losing his battle with heroin.*

**Prodigal Suffering**

 Most individual recovery ministries are founded to deal with suffering of some kind. At the time of this writing, my church (Watermark Dallas) has 47 such ministries and most of them deal with suffering brought about by specific “troubles”. The pain might be caused by the death of a loved one, divorce, abortion, sexual abuse, or the failure to have children. These are only a few examples. The Prodigal ministry deals with the pain and chaos experienced when a loved one is simply not walking with God. We refer to that person as a Prodigal. The majority of participants in Prodigal are parents of rebellious children, many of whom struggle with addiction. The fear and worry that surrounds any loved one on heroin or crystal meth is incredible, but the eternal fate that surrounds a child or spouse that does not believe in God is equally as painful to a parent who fully understands the consequence of eternal separation from God.

If we can learn from our present Prodigal suffering, it will give us strength and perspective to persevere. This experience can strengthen our character and allow us to glorify God in our journey. (James 1:2-4) We discussed this concept in some detail in last weeks lesson on wrestling with God. ***Trust*** *in a sovereign loving God is the answer to the struggle we have when we don't understand what He is up to.*

 However, in this week’s lesson, we will look at the problem in a more basic and different focus. We will look at how a “good” God can allow suffering in the first place. The inability to answer this question is the #1 reason that atheists claim they do not believe in God, but it is also a question that many believers struggle with as well. This week we will look at

* Why we suffer
* Wrong responses to suffering
* Biblical responses to suffering
* How suffering can grow us and glorify God in the process.

**Why is there Suffering?**

 We will look at 5 distinct possibilities in this lesson. As always, we will look to the wisdom and direction of God’s Word for our answers.

* **Sin**
	+ It is Important to keep in mind that the Bible, from start to finish is a story of God’s love for us. It is a story of His incredible and inexplicable desire to have a love relationship with us. Why ? Love *defines* him. God is love. (I John 4:8) However, ***Love demands a choice***. Without a choice, we are mere robots that are *obligated* to obey and that is not love. God gives us the ***freedom to choose to love him or to disregard him in sin***. We have the option to make good choices but we also have the option to make bad choices. Adam and Eve chose to disobey in the Garden in what is called the “original sin” that cursed all human offspring to death. (Gen. 2:15-3:1) We have all chosen to rebel against God and sin in our human nature as a result of Eve’s sin called “the Fall”. So with the fall, Sin entered the world. The consequences of sin is suffering for sinners, a group that included us all.
* **Satan**
	+ In Luke 10:17-18 Jesus states that He Himself saw Satan fall to earth from heaven like a lightning bolt. Paul explains in 2Cor. 4:4 that Satan is the god of this present age and blinds the eyes of believers. That certainly causes troubles and suffering. We must keep in mind in the midst of our suffering that we live in a fallen world, ruled by Satan, until Christ returns and conquers him once and for all. (I Cor. 15:24)
	+ We should be reminded that our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against rulers and authorities that are spiritually dark and evil and reside in the heavenly realms. (Eph. 6:12)
	+ We should remember in our struggles that the devil is a formidable adversary who is looking to destroy us.
		- Luke 22:31-32 “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”
		- I Peter 5:8 “…Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”
	+ Why doesn’t God stamp out this suffering now? Are you sure you are ready? Are your loved ones ready? Have you done all you can do to let everyone in you life know the joy of heaven and the cost of rejecting God?
		- Romans 3:23 all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory
		- Romans 6:23 the wages of sin is death
		- I Peter 1:17 Since we call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.
		- **2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance.**

Eternal separation from God is a horrific thing. As we consider the finality and ultimate consequence of eternity, we need to be sure we are personally ready for the second coming and furthermore, we must be sure we have done everything we can to inform others before it is too late. So God’s delay in coming to set all things new and eliminate suffering(Rev 21:4) is merciful.

* **God’s Glory**
	+ We often struggle with suffering, thinking it might be a result of some sin in our life. As we have seen, that might very well be true, however suffering is not always the result of personal sin. We see that clearly in the story of the blind man in John 9:1-3. The disciples saw a man blind from birth and the disciples asked Jesus who sinned to cause it. Jesus clearly stated, *“…but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.”* This played out in his healing by Jesus, bringing glory to the Father.
	+ God can redeem sin and suffering for His glory. Suffering may indeed be caused by sin, but even in this situation God can redeem the situation for His glory. Just look around you in the Prodigal ministry alone and witness every leader and many fellow participants who are living out the privilege of II Cor. 1:3,4 *“**Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”*
	+ We can glorify God by learning to give thanks in ALL situations.
		- I Thess 5:18 “In everything give thanks, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”
		- Paul model and example: **2 Cor.12:7-10** *To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness? Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. This is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, than I am strong.*
* **Our Good**
	+ We are reminded of eternal perspective
	+ Luke 13:1-13 Tower of Siloam “…unless you repent, you too will all perish”
	+ We can grow to greater spiritual maturity through suffering as we learn dependency on Him, His love for us, and His sufficiency to meet our needs and give us comfort, peace and joy despite our circumstances . We can only learn certain things through suffering. This brings him glory in the most powerful of ways.

***It has been said that it is hard to see the light of our faith in the daylight, but it shines most brightly in the dark night of affliction and suffering****.*

* + - **Psalm 119:71 *“It was good for me to be afflicted, so that I might learn your decrees”***
* **Inexplicable Suffering**
	+ At the end of the day we may never know the reasons for suffering. There is no doubt that the news is filled today with atrocities that are so evil, horrific, and seemingly senseless that we simply can not wrap our minds around them. Not surprisingly, such atrocities are not new, and the Bible addresses inexplicable issues that humans can never understand.
		- Isaiah 55:8,9 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.
		- It has been said by many critics that Paul’s explanation of election and predestination in Romans 8-11 is an excellent argument that is incredibly logical and exemplary in its format. Paul had insight that none of us have enjoyed as he actually had a personal encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. (Acts 9:3) He also got a glimpse of heaven so clear that he stated he was not allowed to tell of the wonders he saw. (2 Cor. 12:2) So even with this remarkable personal insight he states at the end of his brilliant discourse in Romans 11:33-36 *Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.*

**God’s Solution to Evil and Suffering : Jesus Christ**

 Jesus Christ, motivated by an inexplicable and radical unconditional love for us, died for our sins. It is that simple. The New Testament states time and again that if we believe in Him we receive the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Jesus Christ takes up residence in our body. The power of the Spirit is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead and will raise us up on the last day. (John 6:40) A spirit filled life is the way we can battle suffering, persevere, and grow through that suffering, which will bring God the glory He deserves.

 Furthermore, Jesus modeled for us, perfection in suffering. Gain insight from the verses below.

* Isaiah 53:3 *He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering”*
* Hebrews 2:18 *because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted*
* Hebrews 4:15 *We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet without sin*
* Hebrews 5:8 “Although he (Jesus) was a son, He learned obedience from what He suffered.”

Jesus Christ allows us to have a purpose greater than ourselves, namely, to live for him. If we define our ultimate purpose along the lines of serving Him and bringing God glory, it takes us away from idolizing personal happiness through earthly treasures to ***an eternal perspective that experiences joy, despite our suffering***. God is concerned with His glory (Col 1:17), our eternal life with Him in paradise (John 3:16), and our full, abundant, joy filled life on earth. (John 10:10)

**A Biblical View of Suffering**

There are really only two basic perspectives or paradigms in life. A self-centered world view in which the world revolves around us and our pleasure. The world today markets to us constantly, trying to convince us that we deserve good things, especially happiness. If that is our perspective it is quite easy to see how we can become angry, bitter, worried, unforgiving and depressed when experiencing suffering and pain. We often blame others, or may even blame God Himself.

Accepting a Biblical worldview of suffering is quite different. It is a difficult paradigm shift to accept, but is only possible when we accept Jesus Christ. By believing in Jesus and accepting His rule in our life, our eyes are then opened to Truth by the indwelling Holy Spirit. The resultant Biblical worldview allows God to place His hands on us and shape us according to His Purpose, which is for our good and His glory. **Our life is viewed as His property and we rest knowing we are in good hands. (Gal.2:20)**

 Todd Wagner stated in a sermon\* that the Lord is seeking to have one of two things happen when we are experiencing hardship

1) He is desiring to take someone far from God and draw that person to Himself **(Evangelism)**

2) He is desiring to take someone near to Him and deepen their faith and intimacy with Christ and/or to have their response to suffering(“Witness, walk”) draw others closer to Himself **(Discipleship)**

**\*** *From Confusion to Crisis to Clarity to Completion: The Progression from Christlessness to Contagious Faith : Todd Wagner | 04-03-2011 | John 4:39-54*

**Biblical Support of Transformation Through Suffering**

The Word of God is very clear on how perseverance under trials and suffering transform us to greater Christlikeness, which should be our goal every day. Let’s review a few verses that make this point clearly.

* Romans 5:3-5 “More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.
* James 1:1-5 “Consider it pure joy my brothers when you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.
* Hebrews 12: 1-13 we have referenced these verses many times for great reason. They tell us that Jesus knows how we suffer, and if we will look to Him and His suffering for us, we can navigate tough times and not grow weary or lose heart in our journey. He tells us further that we should endure hardship (suffering) as discipline, and that we are disciplined by God out of love for we are his children. He tells us that no discipline is pleasant at the time but later on it will produce a harvest of righteousness and peace if we will just allow ourselves to be trained by it.
* II Cor. 4:7-11, 16-18 these verses were used in the lesion on Wrestling with God to remind us that although we suffer we are never defeated and that our troubles are light and momentary in relation to the paradise of eternity.

**How Do We Persevere Through Suffering?**

*As a long time Dallas resident, I must admit that I am passionate about the Cowboys. I am sure you have your favorite team, but imagine with me if you will, hard though it may be for some of you, that you loved them too. Passionately. Life and death. Imagine further that your Cowboys were in the Super Bowl and circumstances dictated that you were travelling back on a business trip on Super Bowl Sunday. You couldn’t watch the game live and you had to record it. You de-plane and rush to your car. You have so far avoided radio, pilot announcements, and almost all interchange with any human possible of spoiling the outcome for you. Safely in security of your own home, you change into comfy wear, grab some chips and favorite beverage and turn on the TV. You select the game but before you can press play, you discover a malfunction has occurred. The DVR is frozen on the last image. This image shows a jubilant Troy Aikman embracing Jimmy Johnson soaked head to toe in champagne.*

 *After the shock, you hit rewind and press play. How do you watch the game? What frame of mind are you in? Any stress? Any anger? What if the cowboys get intercepted or fall two or three touchdowns behind ? No biggie, right? Why? Because you know how the story ends. Cowboys win. The game is over and there is no way the outcome can be changed and your dreams have come true. Cowboys win!*

 *Isn’t that like our story? It is life and death, real life and death with eternal consequences. The only way to navigate suffering is to know how the story ends. You win! You have to believe the Word of God is true and if so, Jesus’ suffering has allowed us to navigate our own suffering no matter how hard and no matter how much we are saddened and perplexed by it. You have to know that God is who He says he is as sure as you were of Cowboys ecstasy upon seeing the frozen DVR.*

 *Can any human be that certain. Many many live lives proving they are. However let’s look at Paul as an incredible example.*

**Paul’s Model**

Paul was honest about his suffering and the battles that raged within his human body, desiring to do good, but doing the opposite. He was honest about the “thorn in his flesh” that he asked God to take away. However, he modeled for all of us a life that was not just about words but about action. (I John 3:18)

His example is shown here as he was truly grateful for his suffering as it furthered the cause of Christ

* **Phillipians 1:12-14** *And I want you to know, my dear brothers and sisters, that everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News.**For everyone here, including the whole palace guard, knows that I am in chains because of Christ. And because of my imprisonment, most of the believers here have gained confidence and boldly speak God’s message without fear.*

A few verses later his confident eternal perspective continues to amaze.

* **Phillipians 1:20-24** *For I fully expect and hope that I will never be ashamed, but that I will continue to be bold for Christ, as I have been in the past. And I trust that my life will bring honor to Christ, whether I live or die.* *For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better.**But if I live, I can do more fruitful work for Christ. So I really don’t know which is better.**I’m torn between two desires: I long to go and be with Christ, which would be far better for me.**But for your sakes, it is better that I continue to live.*

How could Paul live so confidently ? Paul knew and understood God and how the story ends. He was certain of eternity and the paradise that awaited him. How do we know this? He tells us reluctantly in II Cor 12:1-4

*“This boasting will do no good, but I must go on. I will reluctantly tell about visions and revelations from the Lord.**I was caught up to the third heaven fourteen years ago. Whether I was in my body or out of my body, I don’t know—only God knows. Yes, only God knows whether I was in my body or outside my body. But I do know* *that I was caught up to paradise and heard things so astounding that they cannot be expressed in words, things no human is allowed to tell.”*

You might say, “but Paul was an eyewitness of God and of heaven. “ Paul saw how the story ends. Paul had divine inspiration, but so do we, in His Word. You have the choice to believe in the eternal DVD freeze frame of you joyously embraced in the arms of Jesus in Heaven…or you can walk away, as many do. The choice is yours. However, if you do believe in the eternal certainty of Christ, you can navigate suffering and any hardship this side of heaven, for your benefit, and for God’s glory. The Prodigal ministry, it’s curriculum and its leaders, stand ready to point you to the King in your journey; toward the faith and trust necessary to finish well.

In closing, let’s not lose perspective from our study on suffering. God wept over Jerusalem. He hates our suffering. His first miracle was to make wine as he celebrated a wedding. God wants us to enjoy his creation. He made it for us! However, suffering is unavoidable. Let us pray that as we walk along the path of suffering, we can do so boldly and courageously, being certain of that future picture described compassionately and lovingly in Revelation 21:4 that one day all our tears will be wiped away and there will be no more pain or suffering. We will enjoy perfect fellowship with Jesus and His Church forever in paradise.