

THE GRACE GIFT OF SUFFERING

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Trials are a natural part of life in this world and gifts of grace which God lavishes upon His disciples. They are both a necessary aspect of each disciple's spiritual training and one of the disciple's means of ministering to others.

A man is cutting his front lawn. He looks up from his task just in time to see a heavy dump truck back out of his neighbor's driveway—right over the neighbor's 18 month-old son who had been squatting behind the huge tires. The man accompanies the hysterical mother and ashen father to the hospital in an ambulance. There is no hope for the little boy; he has been crushed almost beyond recognition.

After five years of marriage Jane wakes up in the night to find her husband Dan poking her, and pointing to his mouth. As she hauls herself out of sleep, she realizes that her husband has awakened to find that he cannot speak, and is badly frightened. A quick phone call to the doctor issues in a swift trip to the hospital. The next day the surgeons operate for cancer of the brain. They cannot get much of it. The trauma of the surgery wipes out all of Dan's learned memory. Dan no longer knows how to read and write and he cannot recognize his infant son. The operation has caused such a shock that the cancer for some reason stops growing. Dan's personality, however, has been altered. He is frustrated, angry, irritable, and needs twenty-four hour care. After 3 years of minimal recovery the cancer again begins to grow, and kills Dan four months later.

In the Holocaust six million Jews were systematically exterminated. It is estimated that over 10 million in central Africa will die from AIDS. Nearly 3,000 people were killed on September 11, 2001 when the United States was savagely attacked by terrorists. Over 1,800 people died as a result of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The day these notes were finished almost 300 people remain unaccounted for after a ferry carrying 459 people capsized and sank off South Korea.

Why do these things happen? Why is there so much suffering in the world? Where is God in times like these?

Suffering Is a Gift of God

A gift is something that one individual voluntarily bestows on another without compensation. It is normally something that will benefit and/or bring enjoyment to the recipient. The Bible describes Christians as people who are laden with spiritual gifts.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge- ⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you- ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 1:4-7)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 1:3)

According to the Apostle Paul one such gift from God is suffering.

For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake. (Philippians 1:29)

The word “granted” in Philippians 1.29 is the Greek word χαρίζομαι. The root of this word is χάρις, the common word translated “grace” or “unmerited favor.” The word χαρίζομαι means to give or grant something out of graciousness and generosity.¹ It is giving that desires the good and benefit of the recipient. Suffering is a part of every human life and for the believer suffering is a gracious and necessary gift of God. “One should not court suffering. But suffering on behalf of Christ, in the interest of Him and His gospel is different. Such suffering is indeed a blessing, a gracious privilege.”² This workshop will seek to answer two questions related to suffering. What kinds of suffering are gifts from God, and in what way is suffering a gift of God?

¹Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 158; Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 170-171; John MacArthur, *Philippians* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2001), 95.

²William Hendriksen, *Philippians, Colossians, & Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 1979), 90.

What Kinds of Suffering Are Gifts from God?

God Places General Suffering Into the Lives of Every Human Being.

To the woman he said, ‘I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.’

¹⁷And to Adam he said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it, cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.’ (Genesis 3:16-19)

General human suffering occurs because people live in a sin-cursed world. Because of sin, human beings are cursed to live lives of difficulty, hardship, and toil. Human beings are cursed to experience agony in childbirth; pain, toil, and sweat in daily labor; old age; the deterioration of the body and mind; physical death; and all of the suffering that accompanies those things. Adam’s bite of the forbidden fruit brought all these into the world.³ When people suffer they should remember that it all began with Satan and with their father Adam. One rebellious angel brought sin and suffering into creation, and one rebellious man brought them into the abode of mankind.

Because of sin, every human being will be touched by toil, heartache, misfortune, sickness, pain, death, and sorrow. But, God’s children must also understand the truth of Philippians 1:29. God sovereignly rules His creation, and in His sovereignty each occasion of suffering is handpicked by God and given to His children as a gift for their good. God gives gifts to His children daily. Some days He gives health and prosperity. Other days the package beneath the wrappings contains the flu, the loss of job, the miscarriage of a baby, a phone call from the police, the debilitation of a stroke, a report of terminal cancer, or the unexpected death of a loved one. When believers face those types of trials, they must learn to recognize them as gifts from their loving Father.

³“The oracles thus all reflect a talionic justice: they sinned by eating, and so would suffer to eat, she led her husband to sin, and so would be mastered by him, they brought pain into the world by their disobedience, and so would have painful toil in their respective lives These declarations list the inevitable consequences of disobedience . . .” Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 1988), 148.

God Places Oppressive Suffering Into the Lives of Christians.

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. ²¹ But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. (John 15:18-21)

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 regard 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; ¹⁶ yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Peter 3:14-16)

Beloved, 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. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. (1 Peter 4:12-14)

And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' (Acts 9:4. Saul was persecuting Christ's church.)

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (2 Timothy 3:12)

Mistreatment because of one's Christian stand and testimony should never be a surprise. It should rather be a delight because the world is persecuting Christ through the believer. It should be a delight to take arrows meant for the Savior. William Temple once wrote that the world "would not hate angels for being angelic; but it does hate men for being Christians. It

grudges them their new character; it is tormented by their peace; it is infuriated by their joy.”⁴
One of the greatest gifts and highest privileges God grants His children is that of following Jesus in holiness, earthly joy and suffering at the hands of His enemies.

God Places Disciplinary Suffering Into the Lives of Christians.

And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.’ ⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. ¹² Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees. (Hebrews 12:5-12)

Sometimes the believer’s earthly trials and suffering constitute a fatherly spanking. When facing trials he should consider whether or not they are somehow of his own doing. Is there unconfessed sin in his life? Is he holding on to certain sin habits? Is he involved in sinful relationships? Is he living for himself instead of for God’s glory? God’s fatherly love for the believer is perfect and so is His fatherly discipline.

⁴Cited by Leon Morris, *Expository Reflections On the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 1990), 28.

In What Way Is Suffering a Gift of God?

Suffering Is a Gift of God Because It Is for the Believer's Good.
Suffering Accomplishes What Nothing Else Can.

Suffering Produces Humility and Dependence on the Lord.

So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

There are four noteworthy things about Paul's debilitating thorn (σκόλοψ) in the flesh. First, it is difficult to know for sure what it entails. As many as a dozen explanations have been advanced—things like migraine headaches, eye diseases, epilepsy, gallstones, gout, and rheumatism. The Bible does not provide details because the exact nature of the problem is irrelevant to Paul's argument. What is apparent is that the thorn was a recurrent trial that could incapacitate or humiliate him at any time.⁵

Second, God gave it to Paul. Whatever this thorn in the flesh was "it was designed to achieve a beneficial and therefore divine purpose"⁶ and Paul pleaded with God to take it away because God was its ultimate source.

Third, Satan was involved. Somehow Satan used this affliction to his advantage and tormented Paul with it. "Harass" (κολαφίζω) is the same word used of the Sanhedrin striking

⁵Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 851.

⁶Ibid, 856.

Jesus on the face.⁷ Satan used this God-given affliction to constantly pummel the Apostle Paul.⁸ “Here, then, we are confronted with a paradox. One and the same σκόλοψ was simultaneously given by God and used by Satan.”⁹ “Satan has only limited freedom of action; God remains in control.”¹⁰

This language suggests (1) that Satan was the immediate cause of Paul’s difficulty—symbolized by the word *skolops*; (2) that, because the *skolops* was given by God, Satan is subject to God, not His equal . . . and (3) that in a profoundly mysterious way God is the ultimate source of that *skolops*. Paradoxically, *God* is the invisible source of this suffering in the life of Paul, His child and minister.¹¹

It is not that God is here working through Satan, or that there is dual agency, divine and demonic, but that Satan is active at the same time as God and by His permission. As Paul experienced his σκόλοψ, he discovered it to be both a gift of God and a tool of Satan—in the first case, because it deflated pride . . . in the second case, because it inflicted suffering The deflation of pride is God’s distinctive work . . . while the infliction of suffering is Satan’s distinctive work.¹²

Fourth, God refused to take away Paul’s thorn in the flesh because it kept Paul humble and dependant upon Him. Paul places the phrase “to keep me from being too elated ” (ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι) at both the beginning and the end of verse 7. The unique privilege of receiving surpassingly great revelations could “easily generate a sense of spiritual superiority or even presumptive arrogance.”¹³ Pride is a constant temptation, and no one, not even the Apostle Paul

⁷Matthew 26:67; Mark 14:65.

⁸Κολαφίζω is in the present tense indicating continual battering.

⁹Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 856.

¹⁰C. K Barrett, *A Commentary On the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), 316.

¹¹Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 570.

¹²Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 856.

¹³Ibid, 853.

was exempt from it. The temptation to elevate himself above others was real.¹⁴ “Meekness, gentleness, humility, patience, and endurance—the Christlike marks of an apostle, of which he has much to say in this letter—are connected with God’s ‘gift’ to him”¹⁵ of the thorn. Kistemaker writes, “Pride slips surreptitiously into the human soul and rules in such a manner that a person often is unaware of its presence.”¹⁶ No believer is exempt from the sins of pride, arrogance, and a feeling of self-sufficiency, and pride is the father of virtually every other sin. Is it any wonder then that God places various forms of affliction into the lives of His children? Each affliction is designed to uproot pride from the heart and push the believer to his knees; to enlighten him to the fact that he has no answers, no solutions, and no power. Answers, solutions and power reside in God alone.

All the believer possesses in himself is weakness so his only recourse is to call upon the God of grace and plead for the gift of grace. Human beings are inclined toward pride and self-aggrandizement and are prone in life and ministry to rely upon themselves and to shut God out. They attempt to live the Christian life without God’s help and grace. Sometimes the only thing that will reorient their thinking is suffering. Suffering, like nothing else, manifests one’s humanity, mortality and impotency. It moves the one who is being tried to lift up his eyes to the Sovereign and beg for help.

Suffering Produces Christian Growth and Maturity.

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. (Romans 5:3-4)

Count it all joy, my brothers, when 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 and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4)

Trials are occasions for joy because they produce steadfast character and maturity. “Steadfastness” in James 1:3, 4 is ὑπομονήν which speaks of perseverance, endurance,

¹⁴Simon J. Kistemaker, *2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1997), 415.

¹⁵Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 568.

¹⁶Kistemaker, *2 Corinthians*, 415.

unswerving constancy, fortitude, and heroic endurance.¹⁷ It is not passive submission to hard circumstances, but a strong, active, and challenging response to them.¹⁸ The slow and sometimes painful testing of one's faith forges him into a warrior who is strong and steadfast in his Christian walk and character. It produces an unswerving endurance which could not exist without testing.¹⁹

The development of endurance is not the final goal of the Christian life or the trials of life, however. Trials produce endurance and endurance leads to Christian maturity and completeness. "Perfect" (τέλειος) is the opposite of babyhood. It refers to a person who is spiritually mature and has "reached full development."²⁰ "Complete" (ὀλόκληρος) means whole, entire, complete, or having every part.²¹ A child can grow up without a limb, so maturity can come without completeness. This word emphasizes not just maturity, but completeness—the presence of all the parts. James restates both ideas by the negative statement "lacking in nothing." Trials then are designed to produce a level of maturity that lacks nothing necessary for the Christian life. "Trials lead to well-rounded virtue. There is no virtue that trials cannot build. There is no defect trials cannot remedy, no strength trials cannot impart."²² "Mature Christians are the end product of testing."²³ This is why James commands believers to consider them as occasions of joy. Without trials God's child would not and could not become mature and spiritually complete. "The wind of tribulation blows away the chaff of error, hypocrisy, and doubt, leaving that which survives the test, viz., the genuine element of true character."²⁴

¹⁷Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 60; D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistle of James* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 75-76.

¹⁸Moo, *James*, 60.

¹⁹Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 68.

²⁰Hiebert, *James*, 77; John MacArthur, *James* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1998), 32.

²¹Hiebert, *James*, 77; Davids, *James*, 70.

²²Daniel M. Doriani, *James* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2007), 22.

²³Moo, *James*, 60.

²⁴James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1976), 54.

Suffering Is a Gift of God That Equips the Believer to Minister to Others.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. ⁶ If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. (2 Corinthians 1:3-6)

In this doxology Paul celebrates the joy of divine comfort highlighting the fact that those who receive such comfort from the Lord are to channel it to others. As to Paul's suffering, he was likely considering how God in his mercy had delivered him from devastating affliction in Asia (1:8-10; 7:5-6; 11:23-27) and those thoughts caused him to turn to one of the broader purposes of affliction in his life. Each affliction brought God's mercy and comfort, and prepared Paul to minister that same mercy and comfort to others who were suffering. "The divine purpose in granting such strengthening aid during suffering is to enable the sufferer to administer comfort to others."²⁵ "Comfort" in its various forms is παρακαλέω which has the idea of encouragement, help, and consolation.²⁶ "The present context of affliction, peril, and deliverance, determines the sense here is comfort."²⁷ It "is a consolatory strengthening in the face of adversity that affords spiritual refreshment."²⁸

What is most interesting is that the comfort Paul ministered to others was not his own, but the Lord's. Christians "comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." "The exercise of 'comfort' appears as a charisma, a concrete manifestation of the grace of God, a divine intervention."²⁹

The spiritual principle he is enunciating is that the Christians' experience of God's help, consolation, and encouragement in the midst of all life's afflictions constantly qualifies

²⁵Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 143.

²⁶Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 69.

²⁷Ibid, 60.

²⁸Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 143.

²⁹Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 73.

and empowers them to communicate the divine ‘comfort’ to others who face troubles of any variety. It is God, not the apostle, from whom all help and succor comes Paul is simply the ‘middle man’ between the producer and consumers.³⁰

Consequently, when one is suffering, he should consider how he may minister the Lord’s comfort to others. He should ask the Lord to teach him and equip him to pass along divine consolation to those in need. Suffering is a tremendous blessing because it allows God’s children to channel His comfort to those who are hurting.

Suffering Is a Gift of God That Advances the Gospel.

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. ¹⁴ And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. (Philippians 1:12-14)

In this passage Paul speaks of his Roman imprisonment as recorded in Acts 28. According to Philippians 1:12-14 God used Paul’s suffering in prison to accomplish two things relating to the advance of the Gospel. First, it advanced the Gospel “throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest.” The “imperial guard” (πραίτωριον) was an elite group of 10,000-14,000 hand-picked soldiers.³¹ Paul’s arrest and imprisonment in Rome resulted in the whole palace guard hearing that his arrest was for the sake of Christ, and no doubt hearing the Gospel. During his two year house arrest he was handcuffed to the finest and highest paid soldiers in the Emperor’s service. These hardened soldiers apparently told other soldiers of this remarkable man and his remarkable Messiah. Stories about Paul and Jesus—the one who had risen from the dead—circulated throughout the entire palace. Night and day in that private lodging Paul was shackled to a soldier with an 18 inch chain. These soldiers, on 4 hour shifts, heard Paul preach, teach, advise, and pray. They saw him write letters to the churches. They saw how he handled two years of imprisonment.³² They spoke to him, in some cases became close to

³⁰Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 144.

³¹O'Brien, *Philippians*, 93; Fee, *Philippians*, 113.

³²MacArthur, *Philippians*, 61.

him, and in some cases turned to Christ (Philippians 4:21-22).

Apparently the believers in Philippi assumed that Paul's imprisonment was hindering his ministry and the spread of the Gospel. Paul was handcuffed to a soldier every moment of the day. That being true, the Gospel was also handcuffed—or so many believers thought. But they were wrong. Using the word “really” (μᾶλλον) in verse 12, Paul indicates that his imprisonment did not slow down the Gospel's progress, it really or actually accelerated it.³³ The word “advance” (προκοπή) means more than merely a moving ahead. It speaks of a process of moving ahead in spite of obstacles.³⁴ The related verb was used of a team of men who precede an army by hacking a path through dense trees and underbrush. That team removed any barriers that would hinder the army's progress.³⁵ Paul uses this word to indicate that the progress of the Gospel will never be free from obstacles and hindrances, but it will advance nonetheless.

In God's gracious plan He often turns obstacles to the Gospel's progress into tools of its progress. Paul's imprisonment did not impede the spread of the Gospel, it caused the Gospel to break new ground. God gave an imprisoned man freedom to influence some of the most prominent men in all of Rome. Satan's chains freed Paul to preach the Gospel to future leaders in the Roman Empire. Paul was not shackled to Rome's finest soldiers they were shackled to him. He was not their captive, they were his captives and for two years these men saw and heard the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

God used Paul's arrest, trials, circumstances, and imprisonment to impact the unsaved in Rome with the Gospel. Paul understood that and that is why Paul never complained about his circumstances. Paul's sufferings were of no consequence to him. The only thing that mattered was how God used those sufferings to promote the Gospel.

Second, Paul's imprisonment advanced the Gospel by encouraging other believers in their stand for Christ. According to verse 14, not only did Paul's captivity advance the Gospel among the unsaved, it also gave “fresh stimulus and courage for the work of evangelism.”³⁶ Cowardice is contagious, but so is courage. Paul's courage and faithfulness gave birth to courage and faithfulness in others. His faithfulness energized “most of the brothers ” to advance the Gospel with him. As the other brothers in Rome saw Paul suffering for the Gospel and saw God advance the Gospel through his suffering, their confidence in the Lord grew and they too spoke the Word

³³O'Brien, *Philippians*, 90; Fee, *Philippians*, 110-111.

³⁴MacArthur, *Philippians*, 59.

³⁵William Hendriksen, *Philippians, Colossians, & Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 1979), 68.

³⁶O'Brien, *Philippians*, 94.

courageously and fearlessly. Their trust in the Lord grew because they witnessed first hand the fact that God is in control of life's trials and circumstances, and that God uses them to hack out a path for His Good News.

Conclusion

Christians should never be surprised by suffering, trials, and tears. They are part of life. Moreover, they are presents from God. God grants each trial for a specific purpose and to meet specific spiritual needs. Without them the arrogance that permeates the human heart will take complete control. Without them the believer will become puffed up, thinking he possesses the answers to every question, the solution to every problem, and the power to accomplish any plan. He will in arrogance and ignorance worship at the altar of his own prowess.

Suffering, trials, and affliction also produce spiritual maturity and completeness. Without suffering the believer's spiritual growth will be forever stunted. No trials equals no Christian maturity. Finally, God often uses the believer's personal suffering as a tool to advance the Gospel and encourage other believers.

God's children need the gift of suffering and should be thankful for every trying life situation. Trials should be considered "pure joy." Therefore, when suffering comes, in whatever variety, believers should embrace it as opportunities to learn, grow, look to the Lord, minister to others, and spread the saving message of Jesus Christ.

The Pastor and Suffering

In preparation for this workshop I sent the email below to over fifty pastors I respect.

Guys,

At the CCGG in May I'm doing a workshop on God's Gift of Suffering. I want to close that workshop by considering the kinds of trials and suffering that pastors and their wives face in ministry --- things like finances, child rearing, health issues, ministry pressures, marital pressures and the like. Could you take a few minutes and describe for me your greatest and/or most consistent ministry trials/suffering. Maybe even tell me a few stories if you wish. This will help me a great deal. I'm hoping to ask this question of at least 50 pastors.

I hope to see each of you on May 19th.

Thanks,

Scott Williquette

As I read the responses I couldn't help but identify with those who had written. I have experienced much of the same. None of us is alone in ministry. We have the Lord and we have each other. Furthermore, we know that every challenge and trial is a gift of God designed for His glory and our good and growth.

Here is what I gleaned from those email responses.

1. Pastors often face financial challenges:

Some pastors haven't had a meaningful raise in years. Often pastors have no insurance, retirement or savings.

“Financial planning for the future that you were always going to get around too, suddenly is only 7 to 10 years off, and you aren't going to

catch up.”

This leads to great pressure on the family that touches every area of life.

2. Pastors and their families sometimes face great physical trials.
 - a. On-going medical problems
 - b. One pastor lost two sons. One died in the his wife’s womb just prior to birth, the other died after six years of tremendous physical hardship.

“Some of our most precious times as a family - were those times of sharing in his life - knowing it was uncertain for the moment.”

3. Pastors experience the pressure of bearing the burdens of others.

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one- I am talking like a madman- with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, *there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.* (2 Corinthians 11:23-28, emphasis mine)

“Pastors particularly suffer extra internal stresses and bouts of discouragement, because they have to bear the burdens and experiences of every trial that their people go through. That is to say, if they are a good pastor who is willing to really help their people in time of need.”

4. Pastors sometimes face what one pastor has called “pastoral paranoia.”

“As soon as someone is gone a week, or isn’t attending as regularly, you are having a dreadful feeling that they are on their way out. And in a smaller church you can’t afford to lose anybody because you don’t have the programs and facilities that keep a constant flow of new people coming in. And if you have been anywhere very long you have seen hundreds of people leave you already, most for the flimsiest of reasons. It is very painful to live in paranoia and then the pain increases when they go.”

5. Pastors become discouraged because many people don’t desire biblical ministry and therefore visitors and sometimes their people leave the church.

There was a couple visiting a Baptist church. The preaching in this church is faithful to the biblical text and expositional in style. This couple was attracted to that kind of ministry so after a few months they pursued membership. They began meeting with the pastor and all looked promising. Then one day the pastor received an email. This couple would be looking for another church because the pastor and the church’s took a strong stand on alcohol. This couple wanted the freedom to drink wine once and a while which would violate the church covenant.

“My preaching is simply telling what God has said. However, watching a line of visitors come to our church and never return, consistently reminds me that I am not giving people what they are looking for. Continuing to remain faithful to Scripture as the ministry grows older and appears one family leaving from going out of existence is the toughest mental and spiritual battle I face.”

6. Pastors become discouraged because they see their people marginalize the Lord, His Word and His worship and then reap what they’ve sown.

“For me personally, the greatest trial I find myself facing is discouragement from empty pews on Sun am/pm, Wed night when I see that people I care about don’t have a strong desire to place themselves under the Word. Instead I see them choose leisure and sports as higher priorities and then over time watch the

ramifications of those choices in their lives.”

7. Pastors become discouraged when those in whom they’ve invested their lives leave for no biblical reason, or worse, turn on them and attack.

One pastor wrote of “growing close to a family and having them find fault with us and leave the church without any serious attempt at reconciliation. Not only did this hurt my wife and I, but our children were close to their children.”

Sometimes we are accused of wrong doing and can do nothing to defend ourselves. At that time our wives watch and must keep silent.

“We had a man who covertly tried to turn the congregation against me in order to create a leadership vacuum in hopes that he could fill the void (he later admitted his deeds). In the end, this man was caught manufacturing blatant lies to defame me in hopes that he could disqualify me from ministry. He was so power hungry that he we was willing to do anything to gain position and authority--even destroying me. I grieved over the harm that he brought to the Lord's church (for which he will pay; 1 Cor 3:17). I found particularly painful the fact that several people in the church readily believed the lies he told without question or even asking me about them.”

“The thing that strikes my heart the greatest is when those that you have shepherded turn against you. I find the sorrow of that action very heavy.”

“My greatest hurt comes when I am attached personally by someone I believed to be a close ally or friend.” Once “a deacon stood up at the business meeting and unexpectedly accused me of being dishonest with the facts concerning the church funds I had no prior warning that he had any concerns and after voicing his charges, he resigned and refused to further discuss it. He would not elaborate or specify how I was being dishonest or what facts were in dispute. As a result of his accusations I placed myself under church discipline and asked the deacons to investigate. If I was guilty, I was in sin and unfit to pastor. After several weeks, the deacons convened a special business meeting and gave their findings that I was clear of any wrongdoing or dishonesty and that the charges were totally

unfounded. Sadly, even though much good came out of this, several families were shaken and left the church.”

“You have years of pouring your life into them, loving them, working side by side with them, sweating, praying, crying and sometimes literally bleeding together on building projects only to have them get offended and leave over some petty issue. We had a family leave that had been part of the church for 29 years. We saw her family, including her husband, get saved and start serving the Lord one by one over time. But when her granddaughter didn’t get the lead role in the church Christmas Program, she got angry and left. It’s like someone punches you in the gut.”

Sometime you get the “sense that people really don’t want you here.”

Sometimes we have “sheep who bite.”

8. Pastors become discouraged when they are needlessly attacked by other shepherds.

“Changing my philosophy of ministry, and departing from some of the legalistic tendencies within our movement created some painful encounters within and without the church. Being labeled a liberal and a compromiser by fellow ministers is never easy.”

It is difficult when you are “labeled and wrongly called a hyper-Calvinist by those who don’t know the difference.”

“I had come to an unpopular [theological] position. This immediately marginalized me. I was never really under consideration for any positions. Where I did serve, I was closely monitored. When I did get a pastorate I received open rebuke and disdain at the church’s “foolish” choice. I was labeled an actual heretic! It seems kind of exhilarating to feel like you’re a martyr standing for Christ until you remember that martyrs end up alone and dead.”

9. Pastors become discouraged when some in their flock want them to compromise in order to grow.

There is “the continual temptation to yield to the pressure from the flock. It is easy to resist the world but hard to say no to those you care about. They do not always understand. I almost split a church when I refused to do a wedding for the grandchildren of a key family in the church because they were unbelievers living together. Another time I upset the church when I would not continue their tradition of a Haunted House on Halloween. In another I would not yield the pulpit to a female pastor Then there is the constant pressure by the mega church celebrities. Why do we not mimic their practices and have a contemporary praise band worship service? Why are we not as ‘successful’ as they are? Perhaps I am a stick in the mud and should follow their lead? Perhaps I am the problem. I am preaching the Word, but should I be doing more? This is the inward pressure of my own feeling of inadequacy and self doubt.”