

Why Suffering? (part 1)

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[0:00] Well, we are in John Piper's book, Let the Nations Be Glad, the Supremacy of God in Missions. We're in chapter 3. This is our second week, and we're going to be in this chapter again.

And this chapter, chapter 3, is about the supremacy of God in missions through suffering. So it's all about suffering. In 1983, the nation of Sudan was declared an Islamic Republic. It's no longer that, but in 1983, it was declared an Islamic Republic. And so Sharia law, Islamic law, was made the law of the land. It was imposed on all the country's citizens. And the result was from 1983 to 1987, hundreds of Christians were killed. Dozens of pastors were killed. Countless churches were burned to the ground. Then in March 1987, in a two-day period, over a thousand Christians, they were of the Dinka tribe, these Dinka Christians were slaughtered and burned to death in this western Sudan town of Dien. The massacre erupted when 25 of these Christian Dinka worshippers were forced out of their evening prayer meeting. So they were in a Wednesday night, Wednesday night, we'll say, evening prayer meeting, something like that. And when a mob of Muslims with sticks and spears and axes and rifles drove them out of their prayer meeting, and that evening, five, six, seven of these Dinkas were murdered and their homes were burned to the ground.

Well, early the next morning, some of the government officials were trying to help these people. And so they were loading them up into rail cars to try to move them out of the city to safety. And then hundreds of Ritskit Muslims, that's the tribe that they were from, converged on the train station and began attacking these defenseless Christians. And as the Christians huddled down, they heaped burning mattresses on them and burned them to death. And they shot them and killed them and mutilated them. And by nightfall, a thousand of them were dead.

And that seems incredible to us. It is certainly horrific. But even that, Peter says, you shouldn't think that something strange is happening. Don't be surprised as if something strange is happening, Christ suffered and he was brutally tortured. He was brutally murdered outside of the gates. He was attacked, even though he was innocent. And Peter says, in the same way that Christ walked into that, Christ laid down his life. We are to arm ourselves with the same thought, to arm ourselves with that thought. And so we're talking about suffering.

[3:24] And last week, we saw that our suffering for Christ displays the glory of God. It displays the glory of God. It shines a light on how good he is, how glorious he is, because the degree that you'll suffer for something, it shows how wonderful that thing is. And we talked about the hidden treasure in the field that if a man will sell everything he has for it, if he'll suffer that kind of loss for it, it shows how good that treasure is. And so if a person will suffer the loss of life and pain for God, it displays, it shows off the glory of God.

We said that suffering is not unique or rare. I just referred to what Peter wrote. It's discipleship 101. Remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words, when Christ calls a man, he bids him to come and die. And that's just a paraphrase of what Jesus said.

If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. And the cross is the instrument of pain, and it's the instrument of death.

It's not really the trials of life. It's not a sniffly, runny nose. It's not a cranky spouse. It's the cost of being a disciple.

[4:53] It's the persecution that comes from taking Jesus' side in this war between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. It's the pain and the persecution and the death that comes from following Jesus.

So Jesus says, if you want to be my disciple, you have to take up your cross. That's the price. That's what you have to pay. And he says, if you don't hate your life in this world, you'll lose it

forever.

But if anyone loses his life for my sake, for the gospel's sake, he'll have eternal life. So this pain and this persecution and this suffering is not the road to eternal destruction.

It is actually the road to eternal life. It's the road that Jesus took. And so the road to heaven is always a road of pain. Sometimes it's small. Sometimes it's great.

But there's always pain. And the question that we want to begin today with is, do you ever wonder why that is? I don't think we usually wonder that in the general, but when we ourselves are touched with pain, when we experience persecution, then we begin to think, why does it have to be this way?

[6:11] Why did God allow, or why did God appoint, those Christians in the Sudan to suffer like that? Why does it have to be that way?

I'm sure if you're a parent, sometimes you lie in your bed and think, I know I do, what's in store for me? What's in store for my children? If they follow Christ, what will this world do to them?

Why does it have to be that way? Why is there this long, drawn-out period of pain and persecution? Why is it that only through many persecutions that we can enter the kingdom of God?

Do you ever wonder why God can't just sweep us into heaven, turn the lights off on this world, drop the curtains, and let it be over? Why does it have to be this way? That's what I want to talk about this morning.

Piper gives us six reasons that God appoints suffering for his servants. And we're only going to cover three today, and we're going to cover three more tomorrow.

[7:23] And it's so important to understand these reasons for suffering. Because if we don't understand them, that's when actually suffering becomes very dangerous.

Suffering isn't dangerous because it hurts so bad. It's dangerous because it could make us, it could shake our faith. We could potentially give up on Christ if we don't understand why we are suffering.

If we get lost in the suffering and we don't see any of the purpose behind it, that's when it becomes dangerous. And so we want to see, why does God appoint suffering for his servants?

And if we don't get this, there's no reason that we'll go through it. As soon as suffering presents itself, we will run and hide and we'll die in defeat. We'll die some old age without really losing anything.

So why is it that God wills that the mission of the church only advance through storm and suffering? Well, here's three reasons. The first is that we would grow in faith and in holiness.

[8:41] I don't expect this one to be something new to you, but we need to review it. That we would grow in faith and holiness. So turn in your Bibles to Hebrews chapter 12.

This is a very familiar passage. Hebrews chapter 12, verse 10. We know that the Hebrews, the people to whom this letter is written, they were enduring some suffering.

I think there was some push from the Jewish community to come back. And it seemed easier, maybe, to go and join yourself to the Jewish community and leave the Christian faith.

And so the author says, well, you have to understand that the suffering that you're going through, it has a purpose.

So Hebrews 12, verse 10. Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best. But God disciplines us for our good that we may share in his holiness.

[9:53] No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

So let me ask you, when you just read that passage, why does God appoint suffering? What is it trying to, what is he trying to do in it?

What is he doing in suffering? What does it say? It's for our good. How so? What does it say? That we may share in his holiness.

Isn't that beautiful? Isn't that beautiful? The holiness that we have is not so much our own, but God is giving us his very own holiness, his very own beauty, his very own glory.

It's so that we could participate in his holiness. And so he has this in mind as he appoints suffering for you. I want them to share in my holiness.

[10:56] I want them to be like me. I want them to be beautiful like me. Well, what else comes from discipline? According to this passage, what does discipline produce?

What does suffering produce? Someone else besides Jim. Righteousness and peace. So a righteous life, a life of peace.

Isn't that interesting? From pain comes peace. We often think of peace and pain as being opposites, but pain has a way of producing peace in our hearts. Well, suffering produces holiness. It produces righteousness. It produces peace. But it also grows faith. It grows our faith.

So turn over to 2 Corinthians. 2 Corinthians 1. We're going to read verses 8 and 9. We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we are suffering in the province of Asia.

[12:04] We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts, we felt the sentence of death.

But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God, who raises the dead. So tell me, what happened in Paul's heart when he started experiencing these hardships, this persecution from these people in Asia?

What happened in Paul's heart? He was under pressure. How did he react to that? What happened? He despaired of life.

He despaired of life. He thought, this is going to be the end. And he resigned himself to death.

He didn't feel like he could hold himself together anymore. And he was thrust on to God, totally.

Have you ever been there in your life where you come totally to the end of your own resources and you would think this is the end.

[13:19] You've almost been pushed to the edge. And the suffering is so sharp and is so keen that all the hope that you normally have in yourself and all the hope that you normally have in your own abilities to make it through and to survive are gone and you're totally thrown onto God.

And what happened in that situation? What did Paul and his friends, what did they learn from that situation? They learned to do something.

What did they learn to do? They learned to rely on God. That's faith. They learned to rely on God. So suffering grows our faith.

Sometimes we pray, Lord, help me to believe. Help my faith. But do you see how God is going to answer that prayer a lot of times? He's not going to snap his fingers and just suddenly make faith grow in you.

There's a process to growing that faith. And it is generally not a pleasant one. Suffering grows faith. And this is why missionaries must suffer.

[14:33] And this is why you must suffer. God is using it to make you holy. God is using it to increase your faith. faith. So faith needs practice.

Faith needs to work for it to grow. Now, some of you, I know, lift weights. Let me ask you, for those who lift weights, to answer this question, what happens if you use the same weight every single time and you never increase that weight?

What happens? Dare. I didn't know you were a weight lifter. I didn't know you were a weight lifter.

Well, what about if you don't change your routine?

You just keep, you keep the same five pound dumbbells and you're going to do those curls. What?

Okay, you're in a rut. What happens to your muscles? They'll stay the same.

Nothing will happen. Nothing will happen. I want to quote a championship bodybuilder since you caught this up. Alright.

[15:34] This man was during a workout. Now, we're going back a few years. His name was Lee Hain. This guy knew the weight. He said, no pain, no gain, we remain the same. What can be true?

Lifting weights versus taking time to the work. Yes. So if God doesn't put any extra weight into our suffering, is our faith going to grow? No.

No. And that's why we often see the oldest saints suffering the most. It's because the tests that you and I or I as a young person face, they aren't heavy enough anymore.

They're not doing the job anymore. And so there they are. God wants to grow that mature older saint. And so he puts them through a deep pain.

So a professional athlete, their training, their practice is much more difficult than a junior high athlete. Don't you think? Their practice is a lot harder.

[16:39] And so a young saint, their trials are generally going to be easier. And an older saint, it's generally going to be harder. Because God uses that suffering to grow their faith, to mature them, to teach them to rely on themselves.

And have you found it, older saints, that the longer you go, actually the easier it is sometimes to rely on your own self? Because you've been through something like this before. You've endured this

before.

And so God has to press it even harder on you before you realize, I really can't do this. I have to rely on him. So God appoints suffering to grow faith and holiness.

He does that in our lives. He does that in missionaries' lives, to make them more productive, to make them more holy, to make them more useful. Here's number two. This is going to be new for some of you, I think.

It's going to be a little bit hard to understand. God appoints suffering to increase our experience of God's glory in heaven.

[17:41] That's a big, long sentence. God appoints suffering to increase our experience of God's glory in heaven. So by enduring suffering, the reward in heaven is made greater.

Our reward increases as we suffer. So in other words, the more suffering a Christian endures patiently now, the greater their experience of heaven is going to be.

So let me ask you, put on your thinking caps, let me ask you, do you think heaven is different for different people?

Do you think heaven is the same for everyone? Do you think people are going to be, some people are going to be happier than other people in heaven? Do you think, this is going to sound bad, but do you, hopefully you can understand what I'm saying, do you think heaven is going to be better for some people than for other people?

I think this is something that we have lost to some extent. We think that heaven is going to be the exact same for everyone. That the reward in heaven is just this one reward, and everyone gets it.

[19:02] If you run the race, you win the reward. It's sort of like, I, you know, I coached first and second grade soccer players, and everyone got medals.

Everyone. My daughter couldn't understand it. She's like, what do I have to win to have this? I'm like, you don't have to win anything. And she was like, well, I have to win the next game, right? No. Do you see, that's sort of how we think about heaven too often.

If I'm in the race, I win the medal. I don't think Paul looked at it that way. That's not to say that, let's not go into it.

Let's turn to 2 Corinthians. 2 Corinthians chapter 4. So what I want to try to prove here is that indeed suffering patiently now increases our experience of heaven later.

It increases our capacity, as Roger said. It makes heaven better. We'll experience it on a grander, deeper level. Chapter 4, verse 17 and 18.

[20:12] For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.

For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. Look at the passage. What do troubles, what do these light and momentary troubles do?

What do they do? Or what are they doing? According to Paul, what's the verb? They're achieving. They're achieving. They're doing something. The word means they work. They accomplish. They perform. It's an active verb.

So these light and momentary troubles are actually doing something. something. They're not just it doesn't seem like they're doing something. They actually are doing something. They actively achieve for us an eternal way of glory that far outweighs all the light and momentary troubles.

[21:18] They do something. And so do you see there is a connection between the suffering now and the degree of glory afterward.

The amount a certain amount of suffering achieves a degree of glory later. And so there's this direct connection between the amount of suffering we endure patiently now and the glory to follow.

And Jesus points us to the same thing in Matthew 5. And I'm going to read this passage to you. It's a very familiar passage. Blessed are you when men insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven. Now if a Christian suffers much for Jesus, and one who does not suffer as much for Jesus, experience God's glory in exactly the same way, it would seem strange to tell them now rejoice because you have such a great reward.

You following me? If I suffer a lot and you don't suffer a lot, why would it be comforting for Jesus to tell me rejoice because great is your reward in heaven?

[22:39] If Jim, the one who's not suffering very much, he's going to experience the same exact reward. Wouldn't it have been better for me not to have suffered at all? If at the end it's all going to

be the same?

It seems very strange. So it isn't very encouraging to tell one Christian over here who is suffering a lot, that no matter what, you're going to experience the same reward.

So God is not unjust. God is not unjust. He will not forget his people's suffering. He won't forget our work.

Listen to Jonathan Edwards. There are different degrees of happiness and glory in heaven. the glory of the saints above will be in some proportion to their imminency and holiness and good works here.

And suffering is one of those good works. Christ will reward all according to their works. He that gained ten pounds was made rule over ten cities, and he that gained five pounds over five cities. [23 : 52] He that soweth sparingly shall reap sparingly, and he that soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Christ tells us that he who gives a cup of cold water unto a disciple in the name of a disciple shall in no wise lose his reward.

But this could not be true if a person should have no greater reward for doing many good works than if he did but few. So is heaven the same for everyone?

No, it's not. But someone might ask, well, how can that be? Won't we all be as happy as we can be?

And the answer is yes, we will be as happy as we can be. But that doesn't mean we will be the same amount of happiness. We'll have as much glory as we can stand and handle, but that doesn't mean that the glory is going to be the same.

There are some who are going to be happier, so if I fill up a measuring cup with water, it is completely full of water. And if I fill a five-gallon bucket full of water, it is completely full of water. [25 : 08] But that does not mean that they're holding the same amount of water. And that's the way, that's how people, that's what heaven is going to be like.

Listen to Edwards again. Every vessel that is cast into this ocean of happiness is full, though some are larger than others.

Now the point of all this is to say, why does God appoint suffering? Because it enlarges our capacity to enjoy heaven, to enjoy God's glory.

And so brothers and sisters, this is one of God's beautiful works. this is one of God's beautiful works. And I think in heaven, Jonathan Edwards goes on and he talks about, well, how are we going to feel about that?

When I see a saint who's way up there, how am I going to feel about that? Why won't I be envious? He talks about it. This is one of God's beautiful works. We're going to rejoice in God's justice.

[26 : 12] We're going to rejoice in God's grace and his mercy. And our happiness will be so much in that person's happiness that my happiness will overflow that he is so happy.

So this is one of God's beautiful works. So God takes trodden down, persecuted, hurting, suffering Christians who are putting the pedal to the metal who are going all out and they're burning themselves out and he's going to take them and he's making them a bigger vessel, a bigger bucket. So when they are thrown into the ocean of God's happiness, they'll be much fuller. They'll hold more happiness. And Paul says the degree of happiness and this light and momentary troubles, they're not even worth comparing.

It's not even worth measuring the proportion. So when you see suffering and persecution coming, when you experience it even in a small bit now, don't be discouraged.

Don't be discouraged. God is doing something wonderful in your life. He is preparing you actively for heaven. He is working in this to achieve something. He's carving you out so that when he throws you into the ocean of his happiness, you will be ready.

[27 : 32] And you will be so much bigger and so much more ready for it. So here's a good reason not to be afraid to go to hard places. Here's a good reason not to be afraid to send people to hard places where there's going to be suffering and death because at the end of suffering and death is an ocean of happiness that God is preparing for his people.

So when Jonathan Edwards was 20, he wrote 70 resolutions and number 22 was this. Maybe you've heard it. Resolved, resolved to endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness in the other world as I possibly can with all the power, might, vigor, and vehemence, yea, violence, I am capable or can bring myself to exert in any way that can be thought of.

What was Jonathan Edwards thinking? Where were his priorities? I want to be as happy as I possibly can in the next world. And I will do whatever it takes with all my might and all my strength to get it.

So brothers and sisters, there is a heaven to win. There's a heaven to win. The route is often suffering. And so let's not be afraid to suffer.

That's number two. Here's number three. We're going to have to be quick. God appoints suffering for his missionaries to make others bold. God appoints suffering for his missionaries to make others bold.

[29:09] So in Philippians chapter 1, Paul says something very strange. If you thought about it, it's very strange. He says, because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

So that was not what you expected to hear at all. What did Satan want in Paul's imprisonment? He wanted the Christian church to be discouraged, for people to be quiet.

And what does God do in Paul's suffering? He makes them bold. He makes them bold. So remember Henry Martin, we talked about him last week. What made him so bold and so willing to suffer for Christ?

Well, one of the things, this isn't the only thing, but one of the things was he read David Brainerd's journal. And you remember David Brainerd, he suffered, he suffered in the wilderness, and he was coughing up blood as he's preaching to Indians, and he was weak.

Listen to what Henry Martin said, some of his journal entries. What a quickening example that he has often been to me, especially on this account, that he was of weak and sickly constitution.

[30:27] It wasn't because David Brainerd was strong that Henry Martin was encouraged, it was because David Brainerd was weak, and he was patiently suffering. My soul was revived today through God's never ceasing compassion so that I found the refreshing presence of God in secret duties, especially was I most abundantly encouraged by reading Brainerd's account of the difficulties attending a mission to the heathen.

Oh, blessed be the memory of that beloved saint. No uninspired writer ever did me such good. Why was Henry Martin so encouraged? It was because David Brainerd was weak.

And it was because of his suffering and the pain that he endured. And you know, if you don't understand how that could be, I would really highly recommend you read David Brainerd's journals.

And if you are not encouraged to live a more godly life, then you need to check your pulse. You need to check your spiritual pulse. Because you are either dead or you're as good as dead.

Read them. Here's another example. Chet Bitterman was a missionary to Columbia in the 1980s. He worked with Wycliffe Bible translators.

[31:44] And then a Colombian guerrilla force captured him. And so he was held captive for seven weeks while his wife and his daughter waited in Bogota, waited for the release.

The only demand that the guerrillas had was that Wycliffe leave Columbia. All you have to do is leave and he's safe and sound. Well, what did Satan want in this situation?

Well, he wanted Wycliffe Bible translators out of Columbia. So listen to what happened. Well, they shot him. They shot him just before dawn, a single bullet to the chest.

People found his body in the bus where he died, in the parking lot in the south of town. He was clean and shaven, his face relaxed, a gorilla banner wrapped in his remains.

There were no signs of torture. So what did Satan want? He wanted Wycliffe out of Columbia. Well, what did God do?

[32:49] In the following year, or in the year following Chet's death, applications for overseas service with Wycliffe Bible translators doubled. It doubled.

Now, this isn't the kind of missionary mobilization that we would probably ask for, that we would want to see. But this is God's way.

So Paul suffers, and men are made bold to preach. David Brainerd suffers, and Henry Martin is encouraged. And Chet Bitterman dies, and overseas translators double.

And why is this God's way? This is God's way. Well, what is it about suffering that moves God's people to action?

Why, when you read David Brainerd's journals, are you moved for more holiness? And I think part of the answer is that when we hear and read those accounts, we, our spiritual ears hear Jesus.

[33 : 58] We hear Jesus saying, come and die. Because we are his sheep, he is our shepherd, we love his voice, and we love it even when he says, now you go and walk with the wolves.

And we'll say, okay, I'll do what you say. I think it moves us to action because in the suffering of Christ's servants, we see, we see it's not death to die.

It's not death to die. There's a song I love, it's that, it was originally a hymn, and it goes like this, it is not death to die, to leave this weary road, and join the saints who dwell on high, who found their home with God.

It is not death to close the eyes long dimmed by tears, and wake in joy before your throne delivered from our fears. It is not death to fling aside this earthly dust, and rise with strong and noble wing to live among the just.

It is not death to hear the key unlock the door that sets us free from mortal years to praise you ever more. When we see God's saints suffering and dying and being martyred, we're given glasses, we're given heaven's glasses, and we see what is really important.

[35 : 30] It's not money, it's not popularity, it's not having the best house in the neighborhood and the best lawn. It's Jesus, and it's his glory, and when we see with the eyes of heaven, we will gladly go to where God appoints us, even though it's suffering.

And so, God uses suffering to awaken us from sleep and spur us on to heaven, and that's my prayer for us, that he would wake us up, wake us up, and move us closer to glory this week. We are dismissed.