

Why Suffering? (part 2)

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Preacher: Jason Webb

[0:00] Well, we are in John Piper's book, *The Supremacy of God in Missions*. And we've been talking about the supremacy of God in missions through suffering.

! And if you haven't noticed, there's a lot of just sort of common ground that we all have. Whether we're a missionary or not, God puts suffering into our lives for specific reasons.

And those reasons aren't necessarily different if you're a missionary or if you are here. You're staying in your own culture, in your own context. God appoints suffering for all of His people.

And so, have you suffered this week? Maybe it was something small. Maybe it was something large. But I'm sure in some way, each of us has run into suffering in one way or the other.

And the question that we've been asking or trying to answer is, why is that? Why do we suffer?

That's a question we started to think about last week.

[1:15] And that's an important question to answer because it's when suffering becomes meaningless, when we can't understand the reasons behind it, that we don't see God at work in it, that suffering can become very dangerous.

Suffering in and of itself, when it's properly understood, and we are seeing God at work in it, it's not dangerous. But when it actually does us good, but when we lose track of what the reasons behind it are, it can be extremely dangerous.

Eli Wessel was a young Jewish man when he was hauled into a German concentration camp in World War II. And in his book, *Night*, he talks about how he saw his God die when he saw a boy hanged.

So I won't go into all the details, but this boy, young boy, was hanged in the middle of the concentration camp. And it was a long struggle. It wasn't something that was quickly over. And it wasn't the pain. It wasn't the pain of seeing that that was so hard. It was just the sheer madness of it.

[2:33] The meaninglessness of it. The way that God didn't seem to care at all about it that destroyed his faith. And that's why he said, I saw my God die.

He lost all faith that day. And I think we would be extremely presumptuous to think that we are not immune to that kind of danger. We've talked about in James some time ago now, but every trial is at once disciplined from the Lord.

It's for our good. God means it for good. But Satan also has a hand in it. It's temptation. And the hour of suffering is the hour of temptation. And so we have to equip ourselves and we have to realize what are God's purposes behind it?

Why does God appoint suffering for his servants? And if we don't get this, then we are going to give in to despair when that happens. And we're going to either give in to despair or we're going to become cowards.

And when the point of trial comes, we'll run away from it. We'll run away from the suffering when God intends us to go forward into it. So, we gave six reasons.

[3:46] Why does God appoint suffering? I said there are six reasons. I gave three of them last week. And so let's do some review here at the beginning. What was the first reason that I gave that God appoints suffering to his servants?

The first reason that God appoints suffering for his servants? That we would grow in faith and holiness.

Now, how does suffering help us to grow in holiness? How does suffering help us to grow into holiness? I mean, that's something that we all, I think we would all know theoretically.

How does that actually work in real life? Dale? How does the holy to himself have taken away from the holy stuff? Right.

That's sort of the faith side, but I think they're the same side of the same coin. When we're thrust off of our, where we're taken off of ourselves and thrust unto God, it makes us more holy.

[4:55] It increases our faith. Is there any other way that suffering helps produce holiness, helps to grow holiness in our lives?

There. Okay, what do you mean? Right. The suffering has a way of weaning us from the world. It's sort of like, you know how, if you have a loose tooth, or as a child has a loose tooth, and you work on it, and you work on it, and you work on it, until one day it's really, really loose, and it doesn't hurt at all to pull it out.

That's what God is attempting to do in our suffering. He's trying to loosen us from this world, trying to work us back and forth, until the time comes when we, He'll just pull us out of this world and take us to be with Him.

And it will be a painless experience, because we'll be ready to go. And so suffering does that. It prepares us. It gets us ready for our everlasting home, where we're going to spend an infinite amount of time, more time there than here.

[6:10] And so it prepares us for that day of glory. And just going on what Dale said, suffering increases our faith as well.

We read 2 Corinthians 1, 8-9, and Paul's talking about the persecution that he was suffering, and the trials, and how painful it was, and how he felt despair.

He felt the death sentence was written against him. He didn't think that he was going to make it through. And he gives the reason why God did that. And he says, But that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.

When we see ourselves as good as dead, when we can't do anything to help ourselves, and we are thrown onto God, we rely on Him, we realize that He has the power.

He can raise the dead. So suffering takes us off ourselves, and it puts us onto God who has life.

Now, what was the second reason we gave for suffering?

[7:16] The second reason. Do you remember? Ah, Billy. Very good.

God appoints suffering to increase our experience or our reward of heaven. And so again, we looked at 2 Corinthians 4. For our light and momentary troubles, afflictions, are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

So those troubles, that when we gladly accept them, they do something for us. They achieve something for us. They achieve an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

And so God is using those sufferings in our lives, the persecution that we face, the difficulty that we face for His cause. He does that in order to increase our reward in heaven.

So what's the third reason? The third and final. Ed? It makes us bold for the cause of Christ.

[8:23] God does something amazing, and the things that we would think would discourage our witness for Christ, He uses it. He uses suffering to make us more bold.

So remember, Paul's writing to the Philippians, and he's talking about his chains, and he says, because of my chains, most of the other brothers are even more bold to witness.

So it has the surprising effect that it mobilizes God's servants into action. When we see one of our brothers and sisters faithfully enduring persecution, faithfully enduring hardship for the sake of the gospel, it stirs up within us a desire to go and do the same.

We don't feel scared. We feel emboldened because I think Jesus is speaking to us through this experience that this person is doing what is right. He's doing what is good.

It mobilizes us into action. And so those were the three reasons. Suffering is for our good. God means it for our good because of those three things.

[9:28] And so today, we're going to talk about numbers four, five, and six. The fourth, fifth, and sixth reason God appoints suffering. And we could probably say a lot more than six reasons, but that's what we have in this book.

So number four is this. God appoints suffering for his servants to reach the lost. To reach the lost. God appoints suffering to reach the lost.

So turn in your Bibles to 1 Thessalonians chapter 1. And let's start in the middle of verse 5. 1 Thessalonians 1.

Start in the middle of verse 5. And Paul writes and he says, you know, let's see, you know how we lived among you for your sake.

You became imitators of us and of the Lord. In spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. Now we need to kind of unpack this verse.
[10:45] Notice a few things. Verse 5 says, you know how we lived among you for your sake. Paul, Silas, and Timothy lived in a certain way for the Thessalonians for their sake.

And so we need to ask, what is Paul talking about? What way did he live for their sake? How did he live? Well, we go to verse 6 and it says that whatever this way was, the Thessalonians imitated it. They saw Paul and they saw the Lord Jesus living this way and they imitated it. And then we find the answer to the question, how is Paul, Silas, and Timothy living?

How did the Lord live? And it says, in spite of severe suffering. It was in the midst of severe suffering that they joyfully received the message.

And so it's suffering that Paul is talking about. And so what did Paul do for their sake? He suffered. He suffered for them.

[11:51] When he came to them, it wasn't in strength. It wasn't as a sophisticated speaker who could make his living with the words of his mouth.

He came as someone in suffering. And he preached the gospel in the context of suffering. And so Paul, Silas, and Timothy were willing to suffer in order to preach the gospel to them.

They were willing to suffer in order to see them saved. And that was the kind of the ministry that Paul had continually. He wrote in 2 Corinthians, he said, if we are distressed, it's for your comfort and salvation.

So if I'm distressed, it's for your comfort and your salvation. Paul's suffering was God's means of bringing the Corinthian church to salvation.

And this is a strange and wonderful thing, but as you follow this motif in the New Testament and Paul's writings, Paul says, it wasn't so much my sufferings that you saw, it was Christ's sufferings.

[13:04] That's very strange. Paul says, when you saw my sufferings, what you saw was actually the overflow of Christ's sufferings into my life. You saw Christ's sufferings.

And that's partially what he meant in Colossians 1.24. And this is a very strange verse, I think. It's very difficult if you just are reading it.

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you. And I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions.

I fill up in my flesh what is lacking, what is still lacking in Christ's afflictions. And the point of this verse is not that Christ's suffering on the cross, that wasn't enough.

That's not the point, that that wasn't enough, it wasn't sufficient to atone. It's not that Christ needs to suffer more to save us from our sin. It's far from that.

[14:05] It's rather that they're lacking, Christ's sufferings are still lacking in one way. And the one way that Christ's sufferings are still lacking is that many of the people that were meant to know it and to love Christ for His sufferings, to see Christ's sufferings, they don't know it yet.

And so Paul says, how are these people who weren't at the cross, who never saw the Lord's suffering, how are they going to see that kind of suffering love?

And it was going to be in Paul. It was going to be in the Apostle. Christ's messenger was going to present to them in his own suffering the suffering of Christ.

It's not to say, I hope you can make the distinction, Paul's sufferings are not atoning. They don't save them from their sins like Christ does. But they present, they present the kind of love that Christ had.

The kind of saving love. And so Paul dedicated himself not only to carry the Lord's message, not only to carry the message of the Lord's sufferings to the nations, but to actually suffer for the nations.

[15:20] To show them Christ's love in action. And so that they could see Christ's sufferings in Him. And so he followed Christ's example. And he followed it to the very end.

And he wrote to Timothy, I endure everything for the sake of the elect that they may obtain salvation in Christ Jesus. I endure everything for the sake of the elect that they may obtain salvation in Christ Jesus.

Isn't that amazing? Isn't that stunning? So you ask Paul, Paul, why are you suffering? And he says, I'm suffering so that the elect can be saved.

I want to see them saved. But hasn't Christ suffered enough? Yes, yes, but they don't know it yet. They don't know what kind of love that was.

They don't know what kind of suffering that is. And so I endure these sufferings. I go through these sufferings so that they might know Christ's sufferings. And that's what Paul is talking about.

[16 : 25] So Oswald Sanders tells the story of an indigenous missionary preacher in India.

He walked barefoot from village to village throughout India. And after a long day of walking, many miles going from a village to a village to preach the gospel, at the end of the day he came to one last village and he began to preach the gospel to this Indian village.

And the people rejected him. They didn't want to hear his message. And so he walked out of the small village to the forest or the edge of the forest outside the village and he laid down, dejected, and he went to sleep.

And when he woke up, the whole town was gathered around him. And he asked, what's going on? What's everyone doing?

And the head of the village said, well, we came out to look at you, look you over when you went to sleep and we saw all the blisters on your feet.

[17 : 32] And we knew that you must be a holy man if you would endure such suffering to bring us this message and whatever this message is. And so we want to hear you. And so he, the head of the village said, we're sorry, please tell us whatever this message is.

And that's a little bit of what Paul went through to bring the message of Christ's sufferings to people. He carried those marks in his own body for the sake of the elect. And so this is an encouragement. It's an encouragement for you if you're evangelizing and it's hard going.

It's encouraging for missionaries when they suffer because they can know that their sufferings are not meaningless.

God is using those sufferings to reach people who are lost, to bring them in, to help in a way that we participate in this process of seeing people saved.

[18 : 40] And so when they see the suffering of the messenger, they understand in some way Christ's sufferings. They see his sacrificial love in them. And so suffering doesn't take away our ability to preach.

Suffering doesn't take away our ability to evangelize. It actually contributes to it. So that's number four. Here's number five. God appoints suffering to move his troops to where they should go.

Christ appoints sufferings to move his troops, his missionary troops, to where they should go. And that's clearly what Luke teaches in Acts when he's talking about the sufferings and the persecution surrounding Stephen's stoning.

And so turn there in your Bibles to Acts chapter 8. Acts chapter 8 and verse 1. And I think we're kind of in the middle of a verse.

Acts 8 1. And this is what it says. On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

[20 : 02] So there was this persecution and everyone but the apostles were spread and scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. So let me ask you a simple question.

Where was the entire church right when Stephen was being stoned? Right at that time. Where were they? Jerusalem.

They were in Jerusalem. Now, let me ask you, where were at least some of them supposed to be? Throughout the world?

According to Acts 1.8, Jesus said, you'll be my witnesses to Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the world. In some way, that early Jewish church, I'm not putting a lot of blame on them.

I don't think we should do that, but I'm saying they needed to be going to Judea and to Samaria, and they hadn't gone yet. And so, how was God's church, how are God's people going to get out of Jerusalem and get to the places where they were supposed to be?

[21 : 20] God's plan was persecution. He was going to use persecution to move them, to move his troops. And we find out that not only did that move the troops into Judea and Samaria, but it also took the gospel to the nations.

Persecution brought about the salvation of the Gentiles. And so, turn over to Acts 11, 19. 11, 19.

And so, a couple chapters have gone by, but Luke is going to say, okay, I want to take you back and I want you to see another thing that happened when Stephen was persecuted.

So, 11, 19. Now, those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.

Some then, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. So, why, in what way did the gospel come to the Gentiles?

[22 : 29] It was through persecution. It was through suffering. And I think there's a couple of lessons in this. That not only does God turn defeat into victory, he does that.

Isn't that amazing? The Jews meant this, the religious leaders, meant this persecution to suppress the church, and actually it had the exact opposite effect.

It made the church explode. But not only that, that lesson is good for us to learn, but the other lesson is that it is far too easy for the church to rest where it's at, where it's comfortable, where there's ease and affluence and safety.

And those sorts of things, ease, affluence, safety, have a deadening effect on the church.

It has, it causes this deadening inertia on the church. The law of inertia says that an object at rest tends to stay at rest.

[23 : 36] rest. And so the church at rest and at peace and influence and affluence, it tends to stay that way.

It doesn't tend to grow. It actually tends to stagnate. And so the very things that we think so often would help the missionary cause, like extra money, extra time, extra comfort, it ends up not helping. It ends up hurting the missionary cause. It doesn't, those things don't produce this creative involvement. It doesn't produce this mindset of what do I need to do?

How can I spread the kingdom? And in fact it does the opposite. So persecution is harmful in some ways to the church. That's true. But prosperity is far more harmful.

It's a fact, a statistic verified fact that the wealthier people are, the less percentage-wise they give. Prosperity is dangerous.

[24 : 46] And Jesus was not joking. He was very serious when he says it's hard for a rich man to be saved. And he preached, what strangles the gospel?

Well, one of the things that strangles the gospel are the cares and the pleasures of this life. And so what chokes a heavenly pursuit of missions?

Of saying, we need to go. I need to reach my neighbor. And the answer oftentimes is the pleasures of this world. Just being comfortable. Now the point is that it's not that we should seek persecution. It's not that. The point is that we should be very wary, very careful about prosperity and excessive ease and comfort.

When those things are upon us, we need to be careful that we don't forget the most important things. We don't forget the Great Commission.

[25 : 51] We don't forget the reasons we're here. And so we shouldn't be disheartened when persecution comes. We really shouldn't.

It is painful, but God has not forsaken us. When persecution comes, he's actually doing something good for us. He's taking us off the sidelines and he's putting us in the game and he's saying, now go, do what I've told you to do.

He moves us to where we need to be. And so persecution can be good for that. Here's number six. That was number five. God appoints suffering to move his troops. Here's number six. God appoints suffering for missionaries to magnify the power and sufficiency of Christ.

To magnify the power and sufficiency of Christ. Do you remember why did Paul have a thorn in his flesh?

[26 : 53] Do you remember? God gave him a thorn in the flesh and it had a specific reason. My grace is sufficient for you.

Paul had received outstanding revelations. Things that men are not able to utter. And in order, can you imagine how you would feel if God chose you?

Jesus Christ spoke to you and he told you things that no other man could know. You would have a temptation, don't you think, to think higher of yourself than you ought.

To start reasoning in your own mind about your own goodness and your own greatness and your own superiority over other people. And so, the Lord Jesus gave Paul these great revelations. heavens, you know, he talked about this man was taken up into the third heavens. But at the same time, he received a thorn in the flesh.

[28 : 01] And Paul did what was natural for every one of us to do. He prayed. He prayed three times, Lord, take this away from me. Lord, take this away from me.

Take this away from me. And the Lord answered finally, my grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness. So, this is the bottom line.

This is the bottom line for all suffering. Whether it's in your life, or it's in a missionary's life, God wants to show off the sufficiency of his grace.

Remember what we talked about at the very beginning. Missions exist because worship doesn't. God is after his own glory and all that he does.

And he is going to do all that he does in a certain way so that he is honored. So that he is seen as the one who is righteous and good and strong and powerful.

[29:06] And that includes suffering. And so, Paul was able to say, after he received this, that my grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness, then he went on and said, therefore, I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

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.

Paul, above everything else, wanted the power of Christ resting on him. When he preached, he wanted Christ to be working in that preaching. He wanted that kind of power.

He wanted Holy Spirit, divine power, and the only way that he was going to have that, he realized, is when he was in a position of weakness, when he was being insulted, and when he was in the middle of calamity, and hardship, and persecution.

And so he said, I will boast in these things. I will boast in the things that make me look small.

There's this very funny thing when he's talking to the Corinthian church.

[30:24] He's like, let me talk about the things that I have to boast about. And he talks about how often he was beaten, and how often he was in danger, and close to drowning.

And then he comes to this very interesting story, and he's like, I'll tell you how great I am. One time I was being persecuted, and I had to sneak out of a city in a basket. I was so brave.

I was so courageous that they had to lower me out of the city wall, and I had to run away. I'll boast in those things, because I know as I boast in those in my weaknesses, Christ is exalted.

And so suffering shows us that God is strong, and that when I am weak, Christ's power rests upon me.

Do you ever read, I hope you do, of some of the martyrs that have gone before us? how could Stephen suffer and say, forgive them?

[31:30] How could he have these stones thrown at him until he died and say, forgive them? Do you know the story of Thomas Cramner? I have time to tell it.

Thomas Cramner signed a paper saying that he wasn't a Protestant, that he didn't believe certain things because he was afraid. But no one really believed him.

The leaders under Queen Mary, Bloody Mary, did not believe him, and eventually he was hauled in, and he wouldn't recant his Protestant beliefs, and so he was going to be burned at the stake.

And he held out his hand that had signed that paper, and he said, this hand will be the first thing to burn. So he held out his hand, he reached bent over, held out his hand in the fire, and watched as his hand was burned to a complete stump.

Do you ever wonder how that could be? There's another story, Blandina. She was a Roman slave girl, a young lady, and they were trying to get her to refuse or to deny Christ, lost, and they tortured her all day until the torturers gave up because they were tired.

[32:58] Now, how can those things be? Why will those things be for us if we are called to that? And the answer is because in those moments it's not, Christ is after something.

He wants to make it clear that his people are weak, but he is strong. It's not our power, it's his power. Because there is a real living Lord and he is strong for his people.

And so, what should our response be to suffering? Whether it's big or small, our response should be the same as Paul's. I will all the more gladly boast in my weaknesses.

Or in Romans 5.23 he says, we rejoice in our tribulations. Why can we say that? Because this is the reason we were saved.

This is the reason we exist to make much of Jesus. And if it's the process of suffering that will make much of Jesus, then we can say, I will rejoice in this suffering.

[34:08] Because this is what I exist for, this is what I live for, this is what God has saved me for. And so for a candle, to burn itself out, is not a terrible end for a candle.

It's the glorious reason that it exists, that it is. And so why were we saved? We were saved to make much of Jesus. And that will include suffering for him.

So what did the Hebrews do? The church, whoever the author of the Hebrews is writing to, what did the Hebrews do when those armed thugs came and took their stuff right out of their house?

So they joyfully accepted the plundering of their property. Does that even, like, that has a hard time even registering on my mental radar.

They joyfully accepted the plundering of their property. Why? Because they knew they had a better and lasting possession. So why could Stephen shine like the sun, says, when he was under question and being persecuted because he knew that the love of God is better than life itself.

[35 : 21] And what he was going to is far better than what he was leaving behind because it's not death to die if Christ is going to be honored. It's not death to die if we can honor him who stooped so low and suffered so much for us.

So what way can we start to apply this? We naturally, we can't call persecution down on ourselves. In our present context, that would be folly. So what way could we start to apply this message where we could say, I will suffer loss.

I will suffer for the sake of Christ. We could go and sell our possessions. We can give sacrificially because as we give, as we lose, as we suffer loss, we show that Christ is supreme, even over our things.

And if we can give away our things, someday we will be able to give away our life, if that's what we're called to. But if we can't even give away the things that surround our life, there's no way we'll come to it.

[36 : 37] come to that hour and give away our life. And so Paul could say, whatever was to my profit, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.

And by all things he meant all of his possessions, his good name, his reputation, the honor that he had, all the good things that he used to be able to claim for himself.

He lost everything. And so when we willingly suffer loss, when we willingly give up of our things and of our life and our time and our comfort, it shows that Christ is precious.

It's when you're willing to give your life and your things that you show that Christ is precious and more valuable than those gifts. you cannot show the preciousness of the giver by gratitude for his gifts.

Do you see what I'm, do you understand what I'm saying? You can't show that the giver is precious just by saying thank you for his gifts. In gratitude will certainly show that you don't think the giver is very precious.

[37 : 52] If you're not thankful, that's for sure. but gratitude itself doesn't prove that the giver is precious. It's really what proves that the giver is precious, that Jesus Christ is precious, is that when you willingly give up his gifts for him, you give up his gifts to you to have him.

And so suppose a man and a woman were engaged, but they lived far away from each other. I'm just thinking, never mind. We'll get to that later.

And that man loved that woman. And he gave her lots of gifts, but the woman was poor, and one day she said, I want to visit my lover, but I don't have any money, so what should I do?

And she comes up with this idea, I'll sell what I have. I'll sell what I have so I can get a plane ticket. And so she begins selling her things, selling his gifts to her.

And at the end she had enough money, and she took the airplane ride over. It wasn't that she wasn't thankful.

[39 : 06] It was that she wanted him more. going to be with him. And so when she shows up on his doorstep, is he going to feel unloved because she sold some of his gifts to be with him?

No, he would realize that he was more important to her than the gifts that he gave her. mission and so brothers and sisters, the goal of missions is to make known to the nations of this world to create, to work for worship among the nations of the world.

Because remember, missions exist because worship doesn't. And worship is cherishing and loving God above everything else, including life itself. and so it's going to be very hard, it'll probably be impossible to bring the nations to love God, to find that he is precious and delightful from a lifestyle that says I love things.

And that's something that we all have to wrestle with. We can't say, we can't live like I love things and tell the nations, now God is more valuable than everything. So, we're almost done.

God appoints suffering, persecution, and loss for his people to show the nations that Christ is more valuable than anything else, that he alone is worth living for.

[40 : 43] He does it to move us to where we need to be. He appoints it so that the lost can see the sufferings of Christ, so that they can see the gospel and understand it, and above everything else, he does it to make known the greatness of Jesus Christ, that he is sufficient when we are not.

And so, do you see the pattern in all these things? God appoints suffering to make us cherish, above all things, Jesus Christ and his kingdom.

He appoints suffering so that we will say, I'm going to put the kingdom of God first, I'm going to put Jesus Christ first. Well, may God help us to do that more this week.

We're dismissed. may God may may may