

Xenos Christian Fellowship
Christian Growth
Week 7 – The Role of Suffering in Sanctification

Overview

- **“Life out of Death” Theme**
- **Three Causes of Suffering**
 - **Fallen World**
 - **Wrong Choices**
 - **Following Christ**
- **How should we respond to suffering?**

Introduction: Review Keys to Growth

Remember: The goal of spiritual growth is not only formation of Christ-like character and thinking, but ultimately influencing others for Christ (GREAT COMMISSION). Suffering prepares us for bearing fruit.

One key way by which we grow is to build up the inner man (which we explained in context of Walking by the Spirit in [Week #3](#)). As we take the initiative to do this, we are able to affect others spiritually.

But there is still the problem of the "outer man" (2 Cor. 4:7-16)--the flesh, or sin-nature. Building up the "inner man" doesn't really affect it. For this problem, God has another outward process by which our outer man is broken down so that the life of Christ can be released.

This is the primary role of suffering in the Christian life (2 Cor 1:8, 9), and we will not get beyond a primitive level of spiritual maturity unless we learn this truth and respond properly. Christians who don't understand and respond to suffering in a Biblical fashion often "bail out!" (Matt. 13:5, 20-21)

(2 Cor. 4:7-12) But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. (8) We are hard pressed. . .perplexed. . . persecuted. . . struck down (10) We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. . . (12) So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

The "Life-out-of-Death" Theme in the New Testament

God's solution for sin is always the same: death and resurrection. We have already seen this in several ways:

- **His solution to the penalty of our sins (justification) is the one-time death and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 4:25).**
- **His solution to the power of sin (sanctification) is two-fold:**
 - **We died with Christ (a one-time event) to the authority of our sin natures (Rom. 6:6) and were raised with Christ to newness of life (POSITION). We have a New Identity in Christ.**
 - **We continue to "die with Christ" (a life-long process) so that the life of Christ can be released through us to bear fruit for God (CONDITION). Many passages teach this process:**

(Luke 9:23, 24) And He was saying to them all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it."

This is a "daily" process which leads to increased spiritual life.

(Phil. 3:10,11) . . . that I may know Him, *and* the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

The "and" after the phrase, "...that I may know Him..." probably means "that is" and serves the purpose of a colon. In other words, Paul is telling us that knowing Christ involves an ongoing process of suffering ("*being conformed to his death*") by which the resurrection power of God is unleashed and we come to know Christ better.

(Rom. 8:35, 36) Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "For thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.

Again, Paul speaks of a continued process of suffering ("all day long") which somehow releases the power of God to be victorious in the midst of our sufferings.

(John 15:2) I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser . . . every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit.

This passage speaks of an ongoing "pruning" in the life of growing Christians so that greater fruitfulness results. Be sure in the lecture to emphasize that this is an ongoing process, which results in character transformation, which bears fruit in the world as the growing believer demonstrates the love of God in the world.

(Watchman Nee) "What God is now doing is the pruning work of the vinedresser. In our souls there is an uncontrolled development, an untimely growth, that has to be checked and dealt with. God must cut that off. So now there are two things before us to which our eyes must be opened. On the one hand God is seeking to bring us to the place where we live by the life of his Son ("abide in me"). On the other hand he is doing a direct work in our hearts to undo that other natural resource (our sin-nature). Every day we are learning two lessons: a rising up of the life of this One, and a checking and a handing over to death of the other (sinful nature). These two processes go on all the time, for God is seeking the fully developed life of his Son among us . . . What does this mean? It simply means that I will not take any action without relying on God. I will find no sufficiency in myself. I will not take any

step just because I have the power to do so. Even though I have that inherited power within me, I will not go ahead solely upon it as (a) basis; I will put no reliance on myself."¹

(John 12:23-26) And Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. (24) "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. (25) "He who loves his life loses it; and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal. 26 "If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall My servant also be; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.

Jesus is referring first to himself (vs. 23: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified"). His atoning death enables God's spiritual life (*zoe*) to be given to others. But then he applies this principle to his followers--we must also be willing to follow this path (parallel to Luke 9:23, 24) if we want to bear fruit for God.

Three Causes of Suffering

People often say that suffering is a big problem for Christianity--either God is powerful enough to stop suffering but isn't loving, or he wants to stop suffering but lacks the power to do so. Actually, the Bible presents us with a comprehensive (although not exhaustive) explanation.

We can distinguish between three kinds of suffering. God sovereignly works through *all* of these sufferings to accomplish his purpose in our lives. We may experience all three kinds of suffering involved in a single situation, as we will see.

1. Fallen World

Christians (including committed Christian workers) are *not* exempt from the sufferings that come from living in a fallen world

Examples: Sickness and/or crippling accidents; financial stress from mechanical failures, job loss, etc.; death of loved ones; children rebelling; impact of others' wrong choices (divorce; crime), genetic problems whether physical or mental.

The "Health and Wealth" teaching that those who have enough faith will not experience these sufferings is wrong!

If you are a growing Christian, will you experience more or less of this kind of suffering?

- *We'll experience the same amount.*

¹ Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Fort Washington, Pennsylvania: Christian Literature Crusade, 1961) pp. 157,158.

- **When these things happen, many Christians ask, "Why is God doing this to me?" or "Why is God allowing this to happen to me?"**

Why is God doing this to me?

To this question, the answer is usually "God did not do this to you." These sufferings are simply part of living in a fallen world (Francis Schaeffer's video series, *How Shall We Then Live*, addresses this problem in the last video. You can also read his thoughts on suffering due to the fall in *The Letters of Francis Schaeffer*²). We should especially reject the idea that God is paying us back for sins we have committed, since the Christian is forever exempt from God's retributive wrath.

(Luke 13:1-5) Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. (2) And He answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered this fate? (3) I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. (4) Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? (5) I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

(Rom. 8:19-23) For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. (20) For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope (21) that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (22) For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. (23) And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.

"Why is God allowing this to happen?"

We usually cannot answer why God allowed this particular suffering at this particular time. But we do know that God is sovereign in all of these sufferings to teach us deeper dependence on him, to mold our characters, and thus to make us more fruitful in his service (**Rom. 8:28, 29**: Note the condition of this promise in vs 28b. But realize that we will not perfectly comply with this condition on this side of heaven).

We also know that God understands our suffering because Christ has suffered in all ways (**Heb. 4:15**), and we know that God can comfort us in the midst of our suffering if we turn to him (**2 Cor. 1:3-7**).

2. Wrong Choices

² Francis A. Schaeffer and Lane T. Dennis, *The Letters of Francis Schaeffer* (Crossway Books, 1996) 264 pages.

Natural Consequences: God often simply lets us experience the negative consequences of our wrong choices. This is what Solomon refers to as the "reproofs of life" (Prov. 6:23). Many Christians wrongly believe that being under grace means that God will protect us from this, but there is no scriptural promise to this effect—and there are many passages which warn us against such presumption (1 Cor. 6:17,18; Rom. 1:24-27; Ps. 81:10-12).

Examples: Poverty from sloth or unwise spending leading to heavy debt load; damage in marriage from prior sexual promiscuity; more difficulty in career because of laziness in school.

(Proverbs 6:25-29) Do not desire her beauty in your heart, Nor let her catch you with her eyelids. (26) For on account of a harlot one is reduced to a loaf of bread, And an adulteress hunts for the precious life. (27) Can a man take fire in his bosom, And his clothes not be burned? (28) Or can a man walk on hot coals, And his feet not be scorched? (29) So is the one who goes in to his neighbor's wife.

"We cannot ultimately break God's moral laws; rather, we break ourselves upon them."

Disciplinary Intervention: As a loving Father, God sometimes initiates a painful experience in our lives so that we will not have to "learn the hard way" through serious natural consequences.

Examples: Spanking child for playing in the street so he does not get hit by a car; church discipline &/or human confrontation; discipline at work/school.

(Hebrews 12:6) "For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, And He scourges every son whom He receives."

(Matt. 18:12-17) What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? (13) And if it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. (14) Thus it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish. (15) And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. (16) But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. (17) And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer.

"If you are a growing Christian, will you experience more or less of this kind of suffering?"

- *Less.*
- *Don't call this "suffering for Christ," rather it is "suffering as an evildoer" (1 Pet. 4:15). Therefore hopefully we'll experience less and*

less of this as we mature. But we can respond spiritually to this kind of suffering, and then it will have a redemptive effect in our lives. Rather than giving way to self-pity or anger at others, we should humbly focus on what God is correcting, and determine with his help to not make the same mistake next time.

Warning: *God will often bring this kind of discipline through very imperfect human agents* (boss who cusses you out as he fires you for chronic tardiness; David's response to Shimei **2 Sam. 16:5-12**).

When someone can focus more on the lesson God wants to teach than the flaws of the human messenger, this is a sign of maturity.

- *Don't learn everything the hard way.* In fact, the growing Christian is able to learn vicariously from the Word's instruction and the mistakes of others (*Prov. 5:1-14*)!

(Prov. 5:1-14) My son, pay attention to my wisdom, listen well to my words of insight, (2) that you may maintain discretion and your lips may preserve knowledge. (3) For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; (4) but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword. (5) Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave. (6) She gives no thought to the way of life; her paths are crooked, but she knows it not. (7) Now then, my sons, listen to me; do not turn aside from what I say. (8) Keep to a path far from her, do not go near the door of her house, (9) lest you give your best strength to others and your years to one who is cruel, (10) lest strangers feast on your wealth and your toil enrich another man's house. 11 At the end of your life you will groan, when your flesh and body are spent. 12 You will say, "How I hated discipline! How my heart spurned correction! 13 I would not obey my teachers or listen to my instructors. 14 I have come to the brink of utter ruin in the midst of the whole assembly."

To say "I have to learn everything the hard way" is not a sign of maturity--it is a confession of immaturity (Ps. 32:8-10; 1 Cor. 10:6,10, Is. 48:4).

3. Following Christ (2 Cor. 4:7-12**)

The passages we quoted above in the Life Out of Death section (Luke 9:23, etc.) refer to the *additional (and avoidable)* sufferings we encounter because we have decided to serve Christ. Jesus refers to this as "taking up our cross." 2 Cor. 4:7-12** is a key passage concerning this . . .

(2 Cor. 4:7-12)** But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves; 8 we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. 11 For

we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. 12 So death works in us, but life in you.

The Problem: Notice that the “treasure within us” in v. 7 is similar to the “grain of wheat” in John 12:23-26 that dies and bears much fruit. In both cases, a treasure, the life of Christ (v. 6), is contained in a vessel that must be broken. Paul calls this vessel the “outer man” (v. 16).

God's Solution: Read vs 8-11. As we follow Christ, we will experience ongoing sufferings which Paul calls "the dying of Jesus" and which results in "manifesting the life of Jesus." Note the *process* language in v. 10 and 11 and note the four kinds of sufferings this involves in vs 8,9:

Examples:

- **Afflicted (thlipsis): nagging negative circumstances**

Loss of comfort to serve others: night's sleep; hospitality cost; material sacrifice; hectic schedule; people who rub us the wrong way

(Paul: 2 Cor 11:25b-27) “. . . three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.”

- **Perplexed (aporeo): "without a way;" confusion about next step;** doubt--not just about your own life, but also about others.

Confusion can be a normal part of the Christian life. While God’s moral will is usually clear, God does *not* provide clear direction on every decision we make.

There are times when we lack direction in our own life and aren’t sure what God is doing or what he wants us to do to help others. Like the lights of a car, which only show a few dozen yards ahead, often times God reveals a few steps to take while leaving the full road ahead obscured.

(2 Cor. 11:28,29) "Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?"

(Gal. 4:19) "My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you--but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you."

- **Persecuted (diokoo): hostility and attack from enemies**

Satanic attack; rejection by non-Christian friends & society; Christians wrongly attacking; marital &/or family conflict; job mistreatment because of commitment to Christ

(2 Cor 11:23-25a) "Are they servants of Christ? (I speak as if insane) I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned . . . "

(Heb. 12:3,4) For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin.

Many Christians in other countries suffer persecution for choosing to follow Christ similar to that which Paul faced. Being aware of their suffering puts our own suffering in perspective and gives us the opportunity to pray for them and participate in what God is trying to accomplish around the world.

- **Struck Down (kataballo): sudden, unexpected reversals**

Sudden, unexpected failures; carefully laid plans foiled; cherished relationships lost; ministry failure; betrayal by fellow workers; receiving deeper insight into our sinful nature

(2 Cor. 11:30-33) "If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands."

This is when Lam. 3:1-33 comes in handy!!

If you are a growing Christian, will you experience more or less of this kind of suffering?

- *More.*

The Results: Because we are willing to undergo this death process, the life of Christ is released to effectively influence others.

Read 2 Cor. 4:12.

Other results include:

- More deep-seated dependence on God and therefore more of God's power manifest in our ministries (2 Cor. 1:9; 12:9,10).
- More empathy and effectiveness in helping others (2 Cor. 1:3-5).

- There is no authenticity/depth without this!! Are you willing to die so others can live, and so you can have deeper satisfaction of fruitfulness??

Reflections on suffering and spiritual maturity

(J.I. Packer) "We should not be. . . too taken aback when unexpected and upsetting and discouraging things happen to us now. What do they mean? Why, simply that God in His wisdom means to make something of us which we have not attained yet, and is dealing with us accordingly. Perhaps He means to strengthen us in patience, good humor, compassion, humility, or meekness, by giving us some extra practice in exercising these graces under specially difficult conditions. Perhaps He has new lessons in self-denial and self-distrust to teach us. Perhaps He wishes to break us of complacency, or unreality, or undetected forms of pride and conceit. Perhaps His purpose is to draw us closer to Himself in conscious communion with Him; for it is often the case. . .that fellowship with (God) is most vivid and sweet, and Christian joy is greatest, when the cross is heaviest. Or perhaps God is preparing us for forms of service of which at present we have no inkling (see JOSEPH & Gen. 50:20)."³

(Oswald Sanders) "How is the process of forming Christ within the believing life advanced? Every circumstance of our lives has been planned with this end in view. Our heredity and environment, our temperament, and all the frustrations and disappointments of life are not the result of blind chance . . . As we subject ourselves to the Word of God, the lordship of Christ, and the leading of the Spirit, the circumstances will combine to wean us from the old life of self-pleasing and to conform us to the image of Christ. Our Father loves us so well that He places us in positions of great difficulty and perplexity, withdraws some cherished object of love, places us to live and work with or among uncongenial people--all in order that we may despair of ourselves and learn to draw more on the resources which are for us in Christ. The process of Christ being formed in us usually progresses more rapidly in times of adversity than in prosperity. When all runs smoothly, we tend to forget our dependence on God, but in times of trouble we turn to Him and appropriate His grace and help. Some of the greatest saints have been those who have been tested most severely. Rightly received, the disciplines of life serve to reproduce in us the likeness of Christ."⁴

Note Sanders' point that the very blessings that God sends our way become our reasons to forget God. We see this in Proverbs 30:8,9; Neh. 9:25-26; Deut. 8:7-17; 32:14-15; Hosea 13:5-6; Rev. 3:14-17... and in our own life. This is why Sanders urges us to view the "the disciplines of life" as an opportunity for change and growth.

How should we respond to suffering?

While we should *initiate* in feeding the inner man (i.e., "*present* yourself to God." "*walk* according to the Spirit"), with the breaking of the outer man we should *respond* properly to God's initiative (*contra* ASCETICISM).

Our response to God's discipline/breaking process is crucial. We do not have the ability to escape from suffering, but we do have the ability to nullify God's good purpose for it.

³ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1975), p. 86.

⁴ J. Oswald Sanders, *The Best That I Can Be* (Singapore: OMF Books, 1984), pp. 56,57.

Listed below are the proper and improper responses to suffering most emphasized by the Bible. Ask the Holy Spirit to identify your most common wrong responses, and give special attention to replacing them with the proper response.

1. Don't be surprised.

This goes to the question of how we should view the Christian life—as a vacation with occasional bumps in the road or as a battle with an occasional break.

(1 Pet. 4:12) Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you.

(2 Tim. 2:3,4) Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. 4 No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier.

(1 Pet. 4:1,2) Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. 2 As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.

New Christians should be informed of this ASAP.

(Acts 14:22) "They (were) strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.'" "Forewarned is forearmed!"

Older Christians also need to be *reminded* when things get harder than they thought or when the suffering they experience is deeper or more prolonged than they expected.

(Heb. 12:5) ". . . and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, 'MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM'"

Arm yourself to suffer (1 Pet. 4:1,2; 2 Tim. 2:3; Phil. 1:29). We must prepare our minds, accepting the fact that hardship is certain.

2. Don't compare your sufferings to others

(John 21:18-22) "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself, and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go." (19) Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me!" (20) Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; the one who also had leaned back on His breast at the supper, and said, "Lord, who is the one who betrays You?" (21) Peter therefore seeing him said to Jesus, "Lord, and what about this man?" (22) Jesus said to him, "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!"

"Why aren't they suffering as much as I am? They must be more spiritual. ""I must be more spiritual than them since I'm not suffering." These meditations are foolish, and give birth to self-pity, envy and pride--the very things from which God is seeking to deliver us!

God has his own plan for each of us. Our concern for others should be on how we can encourage them to follow Christ. Our main focus should be on following him and learning what he wants us to learn.

3. Do focus on God's promises.

(2 Cor. 4:17,18) For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, (18) while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

(Heb. 12:11*) All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

(1 Pet. 5:9,10) But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. (10) And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.

In this life: The results promised in this life for cooperating with God through suffering: more fruit (Jn. 15:2; Phil 1:12,13 - including increased impact on others); the peaceful fruit of righteousness (Heb. 12:11*); perseverance, proven character & hope (Rom. 5:3,4); being strengthened, confirmed, perfected & established (1 Pet. 5:10); having our faith purified (1 Pet. 1:6,7)

In the next life: Rewards (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:17); full understanding (1 Cor. 13:12). Like a tapestry, we only see the underside of it during this life. It is full of knotted threads of different colors, and we see no real beauty or pattern. But in the next life, God will show us the top of the TAPESTRY. We will see how it all fits together, and how his hand was always working with perfect love and wisdom to fashion our lives into something that gave glory to him.

4. Do give thanks while you are suffering.

(James 1:2-4) Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, (3) knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. (4) And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

This is a key way we can express our trust that God is sovereignly working through this suffering (Rom. 8:28).

Antithesis: complaining; self-pity; becoming embittered toward God; etc.

It is also a *privilege* to suffer for the cause of Christ (Phil. 1:29; Acts 5:41)! There is cause greater than our own personal comfort: The cause of Christ.

Antithesis: We don't see the willingness to suffer for anything amongst most western people. American hedonism/narcissism—no cause is greater than my own comfort.

This is a choice (imperative), not a feeling! We can and should choose to thank God on the basis of his truth, in spite of our contradictory thoughts and feelings. The result of turning to God in the midst of suffering is a growing trust and realization of his infinite provision and commitment.

5. Do tell God how you feel, but determine to follow his will.

(Matt. 26:39-42) Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." (40) Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. (41) "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." (42) He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

Some Christians think it is unspiritual to admit to God that they are in pain, or to ask God to deliver them from suffering--but Jesus (and many other Old Testament authors) shows us this is not the case. To draw near to God in this way is a precious feature of our personal relationships with him.

(Heb. 12:2,3) Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

But alongside this freedom, there must be the determination to do what God wants us to do rather than to go outside God's will to spare ourselves from suffering. Undergirding this determination, of course, is the choice to believe that God's will is both wise and loving and good.

We need to prize perseverance and endurance the way God does (70+ times in the New Testament)--to "play with pain," to stay at our posts instead of deserting (2 Tim. 4:10). See also Heb. 12:3-5; 1 Cor. 10:13; Rom. 5:4

Conclusion

**(John Newton) "I asked the Lord that I might grow in faith and love and every grace, might more of His salvation know and seek more earnestly His face.
'Twas He who taught me thus to pray, and he, I trust, has answered prayer;
But it has been in such a way as almost drove me to despair.
I thought that in some favored hour at once He'd answer my request
and by His love's constraining power, subdue my sins and give me rest.**

**Instead of that, He made me feel the hidden evils of my heart,
 and bade the angry powers of hell assault my soul in every part.
 Nay more, with His own hand he seemed intent to aggravate my woe,
 Crossed all the fair designs I schemed, blasted my gourds, and laid me low.
 "Lord, why is this?" I trembling cried. "Wilt Thou pursue this worm to death?"
 "This is the way," the Lord replied, "I answer prayer for grace and faith.
 "These inward trials I employ from self and sin to set thee free,
 And cross thy schemes of earthly joy that thou might'st find thy all in Me."⁵**

Memory Verses

Heb. 12:11* - reminder that discipline is painful now, but rewarding later *if* you submit to its training

2 Cor. 4:7-12** - main ways that we suffer due to our commitment to Christ

Assignment

Read *Walking In Victory*, chapter 13.

Complete the *Prayer as a Means of Growth Assignment*.

⁵ John Newton, cited in J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Maturity* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), pp. 14-15.