

**Xenos Christian Fellowship
Christian Principles Unit 2
Dynamics of Spiritual Growth**

Week 6: The Role of Suffering in Sanctification

Introduction

(2 Cor. 1: 9) 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.

(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 on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; (9) persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. (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. (11) For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. (12) So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

(Luke 9:23) 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."

(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.

(Rom. 5:3-5) Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; (4) perseverance, character; and character, hope. (5) And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

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.

(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." (Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* [Fort Washington, Penn.: Christian Literature Crusade, 1961], pp. 157,158)

(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.

(Heb. 12:5-13) And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, (6) because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." (7) Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? (8) If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. (9) Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! (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. (11) 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. (12) Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. 13 "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

Three Causes of Suffering¹

1. Fallen world

Example(s):

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

(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

¹ For more information on the philosophical problem of evil and suffering, visit www.crossrds.org/OnlineJournal/issue2/whyme.htm

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?

(Rom. 8:28,29)

(Heb. 4:15; 2 Cor. 1:3-7)

2. Wrong Choices

Natural Consequences:

Example(s):

(Rom. 1:24-27) Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them . . . (26) For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, (27) and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

(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.

Disciplinary Intervention:

Example(s):

(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.

(1 Cor. 11:28-32) A man ought to examine himself **before** he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. (29) For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. (30) That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. (31) But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. (32) When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.

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

- Don't call this "suffering for Christ!" (1 Pet 4:15)

Warning: (2 Sam. 16:5-12)

- Don't learn everything the hard way!! (Prov 5:1-14)

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

(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 on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; (9) persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. (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. (11) For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. (12) So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

The Problem: (v. 7)

God's Solution: (vv. 8-11)

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)."²

(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."³

(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.

²J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1975), p. 86.

³J. Oswald Sanders, *The Best That I Can Be* (Singapore: OMF Books, 1984), pp. 56,57.

“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.”⁴

How should we respond to suffering?

Our response to suffering is crucial. We cannot escape suffering, but we have the ability to nullify God's good purpose for it. Listed below are the proper responses to suffering most emphasized by the Bible.

1. Don't be surprised.

(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.

Acts 14:22

Heb. 12:5

1 Pet. 4:1,2; 2 Tim. 2:3

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!"

⁴ John Newton, cited in J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Maturity* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), pp. 14-15.

3. Do focus on God's promises (**1 Cor 10:13; Heb 12:3,5**).

(**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:

In the next life:

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.

5. Do tell God how you feel and 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."

Summary

Heb. 12:3,5

1 Cor. 10:13

Gen. 45:5

2 Tim. 4:10

Self-test: Check Your Understanding

Some Christians have a confused understanding of God's grace as it relates to suffering. Try this "True-False" quiz to check your own understanding.

1. "God will never reject me no matter what I do." ____
"God will always spare me from the consequences of my wrong decisions." ____

2. "God will eventually make me mature regardless of my response to his discipline." ____
"God will continue to initiate discipline in my life regardless of my response." ____

3. "God's role for my life will never be diminished by my disregard of his discipline." ____
"God will still have a role for my life even after years of disregarding his discipline." ____

4. "God is willing and able to work for good even through my wrong choices." ____
"God will bring just as much good from my wrong choices as from my right choices." ____

Memory Verses

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

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

Jas. 1:2-4* - rejoice during trials because of their beneficial results

1 Pet. 5:10* - God will perfect, strengthen, confirm and establish us after we persevere through suffering

Assignment

Read John 14-16 and **answer** the following questions:

- What different ministries of the Holy Spirit does Jesus promise? Explain each of them in your own words and explain why they are important.
- Which of these ministries were only for the original audience (Jesus' disciples), and which are for all Christians? On what basis do you make this determination?

Exam Review Guide

1. Be able to identify the three main causes of suffering (fallen world; wrong choices; as a result of following Christ)--and give examples of each.
2. Know the ways God wants us to respond to suffering.

Heb. 12:11* - God's 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

Jas. 1:2-4* - rejoice during trials because of their beneficial results

1 Pet. 5:10* - the blessings that result after faithfulness through suffering