

The Pastor as... Sufferer

Fulfilling the Charge to Pastor in the Midst of Suffering

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John Bunyan told his prosecutor, Mr. Justice Wingate, "If you release me today, I will preach tomorrow," and as a result spent the next 12 years of his life in prison. Jim Elliot sought to evangelize Auca Indians and got speared to death. Pastor Fred Winters was fatally shot as he led services at First Baptist Church in Maryville, Illinois on Sunday, March 8, 2009. Calvin had his migraines, Luther his kidney stones and Spurgeon his gout.

Pastors suffer. But what might surprise us is that this suffering is a part of our calling to the ministry.

Who am I to write about suffering? I am married to the love of my life. God has blessed me with four children that I love to be with. I have a nice home, cars that work, a little money in my bank account and I pastor a group of people that I truly love and enjoy and who are some of my best friends in the world. I have never been shot at, beaten, arrested or physically man-handled for the sake of the Gospel. The only time I have spent in a hospital as a patient was as a child.

But here is the apostle writing to Timothy and by extension to us as fellow pastors:

As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

"Endure suffering." Paul knew of what he wrote. A careful look through the New Testament yields a remarkable list of tribulations for Paul, making the words of Jesus at his conversion all the more real "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:16). That long list can be categorized a number of ways, but here is how I have assembled them. This attempt at categorizing the sufferings of Paul will form the outline for the body of this paper.

1. Suffering that was inflicted by others because of his evangelism.

A. Physical suffering

- Afflictions
- Imprisonments
- Riots
- The plundering of property
- Countless beatings
- Forty lashes less one
- Beaten with rods
- Stoned

- B. Mental suffering
 - Dishonour
 - Slander
 - Treated as impostor
 - Unknown
 - Punished
 - Publicly exposed to reproach and affliction
 - Insults
 - Persecutions

2. Suffering that came simply as a result of trying to fulfill his ministry.

- A. Physical Suffering
 - Hardships
 - Calamities
 - Labours
 - Shipwrecked
 - Adrift at sea
 - Toil and hardship
 - Many a sleepless night
 - Hunger and thirst, often without food
 - In cold and exposure
 - Bit by a poisonous snake
 - Frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, robbers, fellow Jews, Gentiles, in the city, in the wilderness, at sea, from false brothers
- B. Mental Suffering
 - Having nothing
 - Sorrowful
 - Daily pressure of anxiety for all the churches

3. Suffering that came from circumstance and living in a fallen world.

- Dying (“often near death”)
- Poor
- Weaknesses

4. Suffering that came from those “in” the church.

- Betrayed by Demas
- Abandoned by friends when in need

5. Suffering that came from God to keep him humble.

- The thorn was given in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass, to keep from becoming conceited

I. Evangelism: The Primary Cause of Pastoral Suffering

The most consistent cause of suffering in Paul’s life was his evangelism. Paul preached Jesus and men took umbrage which often led to persecution and suffering. In Paul’s command to Timothy to endure suffering, the context itself links suffering to evangelism: “As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.” And this is nothing new; the evangelism-suffering link is found in three other places in this letter.

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, *but share in suffering for the gospel* by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began... (2 Timothy 1:8-9, italics mine)

Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him... Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, *that they also may obtain the salva-*

tion that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. (2 Timothy 2:3-4, 8-10)

Just a few paragraphs before his command to endure suffering in chapter four, we note Paul's reminiscence of shared suffering with Timothy. Although the word "gospel" does not appear in this reference, the events Paul alludes to all involved evangelism.

You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. (2 Timothy 3:10-13)

Physical Suffering

In all four passages suffering is linked to evangelism. But here in this last quote, the suffering Paul describes is given place and time referents: Antioch, Iconium and Lystra. Interestingly, Paul chose examples of suffering that came upon him during his *first* missionary journey, long before Timothy was working alongside him. But Mounce notes how Timothy might have actually witnessed one or all of these persecutions against Paul since he was (a) from the area (Acts 16:1-3) and, (b) from a believing household (2 Timothy 1:5).¹ He would certainly know of them from Paul, yet consider the impact watching Paul get dragged out of the city "supposed as dead" might have

had on a young Timothy. If he was an eyewitness to these events, then Paul's mention of them becomes all the more poignant. Although we are not told in what ways Timothy suffered, Paul thought these vivid examples would serve as an encouragement to his younger friend – "You have shared in these kinds of sufferings with me, Timothy... so keep on!"

And what sufferings they were! In Antioch, Paul and Barnabas "spoke out boldly" the gospel of Jesus Christ to Jews first, then to Gentiles. All those "appointed to eternal life believed" and they continued their ministry until driven out of the region by their antagonists (Acts 13).

At Iconium, unbelieving Jews "poisoned the minds" of other Jews against the evangelizing Paul and Barnabas so that an attempt was made to mistreat and stone them. For preaching Jesus they were forced to flee the city (Acts 14).

In Lystra, things got worse. Strangely, they went from scarcely restraining the crowds from worshipping them one day to fierce opposition the next. Unbelieving Jews travelled 160km from Antioch and Iconium to stir up the crowds in Lystra against Paul and he was stoned, then dragged out of the city and left for dead. (Was Timothy watching when Paul stood up and went back into the city?)

Escaping from Lystra barely alive, he travelled the 93km to Derbe to recuperate, then came back to the three cities in which he was persecuted "strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying *that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God*. And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they com-

The most consistent cause of suffering in Paul's life was his evangelism.

¹ Word Biblical Commentary v.46, 557.

mitted them to the Lord in whom they had believed" (Acts 14:22-23).

This was all very real stuff. Paul could say "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (Gal 6:17). The only marks that brand me are the ones of stupidity. Scars that resulted from things like standing on the bow of a canoe, sliding down the Athabasca glacier, or running full throttle through a college campus in the black of night. The scars Paul bore were the direct result of preaching Jesus – of telling sinners of the Saviour.

Are we scar-less because we are Gospel-less? I think that is the question begging to be asked. Did anyone tell us at the front door to the church that our path would be fraught with tribulations? Did our ordination sermon include a warning that death for faithfulness may be around the corner? Persecutions have exposed imposters over the centuries. Even the great Thomas Cranmer wilted (for a season) under the pressure of three years imprisonment and deprivation. How do we expect to fair?

Brother, are you prepared to physically suffer, not for preaching in the confines of your pulpit on Sunday, but for preaching Jesus in the world? Are you prepared to follow Paul to a literal martyrdom?

Is it enough to answer something along the lines of, "I won't really know until it comes?" I have answered that way. I have wondered how I could endure to see my family hurt for my faith; to witness executions and torture and dispossession because I chose to tell someone the Good News.

Yet, if we take Paul's words to Timothy as words to us as fellow-pastors, then I think what is called for is much more than a thinly veiled statement of indecision.

What Paul commands us is to get in line; to *anticipate* such sufferings as a result of our evangelism. Which means our response to the question, "Do you think you will endure?" ought to be, "By God's grace I am willing to lay down my life for Jesus."

Richard Wurmbrand writes:

I have accepted this proposal. Christians are meant to have the same vocation as their King, that of cross-bearers.²

And if this is true for Christians in general, is it not all the more true for those that preach his message? Carson's oft-quoted statement could be amended to read: "The truth of the matter is all we have to do is [evangelize] long enough, and we will suffer."³

No doubt there were other forms of suffering which Paul endured and that all ministers of the Gospel endure, but we must not miss the link between evangelism and suffering. If a careful look at our lives reveals very little suffering, perhaps it has more to do with our lack of evangelizing the lost than it does with our living in Canada. I have often heard that we do not physically suffer because we live in a

modern, Western culture that is based on Judeo-Christian ethics of tolerance. Maybe. Or maybe we do not suffer much because we do not talk to sinners about Jesus much.

Mental Suffering

If men are not beating us up because of our evangelism, they may be making fun of us, and that too counts as suffering. Paul list-

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² Richard Wurmbrand, *One Hundred Prison Sermons* (Middlebury, IN: Living Sacrifice Books, 1982), p. 3.

³ D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord.*, 16. The original quote reads, "The truth of the matter is all we have to do is live long enough, and we will suffer."

ed things like dishonour, slander, being treated as a charlatan, receiving insults and reproach as genuine forms of suffering.

Again, these particulars are all given in the context of evangelism. Sometimes I think we are more afraid of these forms of suffering than we are of the physical variety. We have hope in our policing and society that riots and torture are pretty unlikely... but who can stop slander and dishonour? Preach Christ and you are bound to have others insult and mock you – they insulted and mocked the Saviour.

Is this really as awful as we think it is going to be? Fear is a funny thing. Often what we fear the most never comes to pass, and even when it does, we find it is not nearly so bad as we anticipated. Moreover, there is a joy in obedience that far outshines and outlasts the worst our enemies can do to us. As Ed Welch writes, fears

betray allegiances.⁴ In other words, they point us to our heart idols. If I love the respect of men, looking good before others, and seeming “normal,” then of course I will be terrified to speak of Jesus. On the flip side, if I love Christ supremely I will say with Paul, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16).

II. Doing Ministry: A Second Cause of Pastoral Suffering

To the Corinthians Paul wrote,

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with

⁴ *Running Scared: Fear, Worry and the God of Rest*, 182.

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countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger

and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is

made to fall, and I am not indignant? (2 Corinthians 11:23-29)

For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:10)

We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righ-

teousness for the right hand and for the left; through honour and dishonour, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything. (2 Corinthians 6:3-10)

This list borders on unbelievable. Can a man really endure all this and live to tell about it? Absolutely, as God gives him strength.

Putting aside whether or not Paul wrote Hebrews, their experiences as Christians and as Christian leaders in particular seem rather normative.

But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For,

“Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay;

but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.”

But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls. (Hebrews 10:32-39)

There is a cost to “doing” ministry. Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that his work among them included being up all hours of the night and a lot of tears (Acts 20:19).

Physical Sufferings

Paul describes things like hardships, calamities, labours, getting shipwrecked, toil, sleepless nights, snake bites and travel dangers as those kinds of things we suffer in order to do our work. Our day has transformed many of these difficulties into things like power outages, computer crashes, car accidents, H1N1, and the like – those things that interfere with our ministry and come about as we are attempting to serve.

These are legitimate forms of suffering and they must be endured. Which again raises the question, “Are you *enduring* your sufferings or *complaining* about them?” Why don’t I sing hymns when my motherboard dies in a puff of smoke? Why do I excuse my anger when the 401 is crawling? Why do I fume over lost sermon notes when the power goes out? Aren’t these just the kind of thing we should expect in a fallen world?

You may have read of the clergy of the United Church attempting to become members of the United Auto Workers of Canada union. The stated reason for this action is the consistent abuse suffered in

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isolation by UCC clergy.⁵ There are many things one could say about this situation, but one question that comes to my mind is, “What did you expect?” There is a physical toll to pastoring in this world and a mental burden to be borne.

Mental Suffering

Most of us are able to identify a little with Paul’s “daily pressure of anxiety for all the churches.” If we genuinely care for the sheep and believe in the reality of heaven and hell, we will strain to ensure they all arrive safely home.

That will create a certain level of suffering.

You will have to say things to them that are very uncomfortable. Depending on situations, it may even put your paycheque at risk. You will have to stay up late some nights to comfort, rebuke, or encourage. You will labour in prayer for them, even when they are trying to use up your time in other ways. You will labour in the Word for them, even if they never understand just how much work it takes for you to say what you say Sunday by Sunday.

And in these ways, you will in some measure suffer. This kind of suffering can be the silent killer of a pastor if he is not prepared to endure it. Like seeping carbon monoxide poisoning, without the fresh air of God’s Word to clarify his sovereignty and goodness in all things, we may end up dying a slow pastoral death.

On another front, many pastors do not make a lot of money, or at least not as much as it seems to take others to live. The

problem is exacerbated by the fact that there seems no easy way to ask for more without looking greedy. This causes many families to suffer want and adds the stress of trying to figure out how to make ends meet. These can be some of the mental costs to ministry.

About three years into planting Grace Fellowship Church I suffered an emotional collapse. Working at the steel company 25 hours a week while preparing two sermons, leading a Bible study and having a sick son finally caught up with me. I got

up one Monday morning and was crying uncontrollably by the time I walked downstairs from my bedroom. I had no idea what was happening or why I felt like a melting hollow chocolate Easter bunny. There was nothing on the inside and the outside was caving in.

To be sure, much of my situation was caused from a fail-

ure to trust in the strength of “the vine” and an overconfidence in my abilities. A little time away and two or three helpful conversations later that was abundantly clear. But the situation that exposed my sin and weakness was certainly the mental burden of shepherding a church.

If you are pastoring then you carry that burden too and this is one of the ways we suffer. For even though we can learn to carry it without having it kill us, it does not remove the pressure. A mule may learn to pace himself to get to the top, but that doesn’t make his load any lighter.

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⁵ <http://www.caw.ca/en/4177.htm>

III.A Cursed World: No Wonder There is Suffering

Suffering is not unique to pastors. Every Christian will experience it and must expect it. But we must not lose sight of the fact that we fulfill our ministry in a fallen world. Far removed from the suffering that comes as a result of our direct actions offending others or just taking us to places where difficulties are inevitable, we all deal with the curse every day.

So, in the middle of being attacked by an unbeliever for sharing Christ with them, your eczema may flare up. In the middle of a trying church discipline case, a close family member may die. While you are busy trying to read for Sunday's sermon a migraine might kick in.

And we have not even started to think of our own "stuff" that we bring to the table every day. That whole package of our sin and weakness and the unique ways in which it works its way out can add to our suffering. Redeemed David lived with the consequences of his sin until the grave and so will we.

IV. The Bitter Pill: Suffering from Those in the Church

I rarely read of Judas' betrayal of Jesus without getting emotionally worked up. I have experienced betrayal and there is something about it I really dislike. I am sure all of us could recount our own stories. But the very nature of betrayal is that it is committed by a person we love and trust. As pastors, this means we will face the suffering of betrayal in the church.

We all know that not all who name Christ are really his. Jesus' prototype parable stressed the fact that there would be false professions of faith that looked really, really believable at the start. Only time, persecution, or the lure of the world

would eventually expose the faker's true heart loyalties (Mark 4). And when that exposure comes we know there are structures in place to deal with it (Matthew 18, Galatians 6, 1 Corinthians 5, etc).

Thus, we will all have our Demases. We will all experience the pangs of being deceived by one who was so close and so helpful to us. This is a unique kind of suffering because of its source. No one expects friendly fire.

V. "Blessed by the Name of the Lord:" Suffering from the Hand of God

Every pastor should preach Job. As if the example of Paul is not enough to convince us...

Redeemed David lived with the consequences of his sin until the grave and so will we.

So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

Without wild speculation on what Paul's thorn was, I think it is safe to say that all of us will receive from the gracious hand of God those sufferings that are need-

ed for our sanctification. John Newton understood something of this and captured the idea poetically in his hymn:

I Asked the Lord That I Might Grow⁶

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.

I hoped that in some favoured hour,
At once He'd answer my request;
And by His love's constraining pow'r,
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart;
And let the angry pow'rs of hell
Assault my soul in every part.

Yet more, with His own hand He
seemed
Intent to aggravate my woe;
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
Withdrew my comforts, laid me low.⁷

Lord, why is this, I trembling cried,
Will You pursue this worm to death?
"Tis in this way," the Lord replied,
"I answer prayer for grace and faith.

"These inward trials I employ,
From self, and pride, to set you free;
And break your schemes of earthly joy,
That you may find your all in Me."

Conclusion: Do we Suffer? And What Should We Do About it?

It should be clear by now that all Christians suffer. It should also be quite clear that Christian pastors suffer in ways that

⁶ John Newton *Olney Hymns* (London: W. Oliver, 1779). Public Domain. Altered and modernized by Paul W. Martin, 2005.

⁷ Newton's original was "Blasted my gourds and laid me low" which refers to Jonah 4:5-11 where God first creates then destroys the plant that brings Jonah comfort in the heat of the desert.

not every Christian will. If these conclusions are correct, then we need to think about how we are to endure the suffering that God calls us to as His undershepherds.

Weed Out Complaining From Suffering

When I look on how some of us North American Christian pastors suffer, I worry. Living in freedom, wealth, health, food, shelter and relative peace can be a trap. Sometimes you get together with some pastors only to hear a moaned list of complaint and grievance as long as Father Time's beard.

"This committee is moving so slow."

"These people are hard-hearted."

"I am still using a 7-year-old computer!"

"I haven't had a raise in three years."

"No one said a thing to me on Pastor Appreciation Sunday."

"I only get three hundred dollars a year for books."

Is this the ministerial suffering Paul was describing?

Worse, some of us get up every Monday morning reeling in a kind of Arrogance Hangover where we fret and complain about low attendance, our failures in preaching, some offensive comment made against us, or the ridiculous idea of that member. And I fear, that somewhere in our minds we tend to think *this* is what Paul meant by suffering in the ministry. In reality though, these are the kinds of thoughts that result from too high a view of myself. This is just pride in church-clothes. This train of thought is cross-less and Gospel-less. How dare I think so highly of my performance or myself when my single thought, even on Mondays, ought to be "Christ and him crucified?"

We need to be careful not to excuse our sin with some kind of ministerial privilege. It is too easy to say to myself, "Well, if they only knew how hard I worked and how much I put into that and how many books

I read and what things I didn't say!" I, I, I. We are so prone to forget that we cannot do a thing of spiritual profit apart from Jesus. So when I speak of suffering in the ministry I want to be very clear that I am not talking about this. What this kind of complaining needs is a fresh dose of the cross.

Making Jesus Great

The nature of pastoral ministry is public. The nitty-gritty of our lives is examined prior to our calling by the church to our office. We are to be rebuked publicly if we fall into sin due to the public nature of our calling. We understand that we preach with our whole lives, not just our pulpits on Sundays. Paul captured this idea in writing the Corinthians.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. (2 Corinthians 4:7-12)

Therefore we must consider what we are modelling in our afflictions. John Piper writes:

The nature of pastoral ministry is public.... So it is worth asking the question, 'Does my response to suffering make Christ great?'

All affliction in your life—from man or nature—has the same potential to destroy your faith or make Christ look good. Will Christ be enough—when my health is failing or when my friends are failing? The magnifying of Christ is the issue whether it's cancer or persecution.⁸

So it is worth asking the question, "Does my response to suffering make Christ great?" If you will allow me to be offensively simple here, I think that means we need to give consideration to things as insignificant as our words and body lan-

guage. If my typical way of handling suffering is to moan and whine and speak about how hard things are for me while I shuffle down the hall "hat in hand" – I am not doing much to make Christ great!

Does the way you handle your sufferings leave your wife in awe of Jesus? Do your words about your suffering point people (believers and unbelievers) to truth and the greatness of God? Do you really believe Romans 8 and are you living like it is true? Do your kids marvel at your joy in God as you endure months of conflict and struggle? I know it is very easy to write these things and something else to live them, but I am only calling you to the application of texts like these:

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because

⁸ http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/ConferenceMessages/ByDate/2007/2370_Treasuring_Christ_and_the_Call_to_Suffer_Part_1/

God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:3-5)

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:6-9)

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4)

God is good and He does good. He is trustworthy and gracious. He will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able and always provides the way of escape. We have got to guard against falling prey to the world's idea that we deserve a life void of suffering and full of comfort. When suffering comes, are you quick to acknowledge that it is from the hand of God? Are you quick to seek the sanctification he desires in you? Are you displaying

the supreme greatness and value of Christ over whatever you are losing?

Something to Say To Those Who Suffer

I sat with a 40-something member of a church I used to pastor at a local coffee shop. The day before he had left his wife. I told him to come home and to stay with her and as he angrily left me with the bill he said, "You're young. You'll see."

It left me a speechless, which, if you know me is quite a feat! I was still in my thirties and I sat there and thought, "Does he have a point?"

Not for one second do I think you have to experience something in order to speak truthfully about it. I believe I did the right thing to call him to repentance and to tell him what the Bible said about his actions. But I had to acknowledge that I could not identify with the particulars of his problem.

When my son was diagnosed with a genetic disability my whole life changed towards people in similar situations. I used to make fun of people with disabilities, now I find my heart drawn to parents of special needs kids.

One benefit to suffering is that it expands our understanding of other's needs and enables a greater pastoral empathy. Here is one way we can give thanks to God for our suffering.

Knowing God

The greatest suffering the world will ever know took place at Calvary. When the Father awoke his sword to strike his Son (Zechariah 13) and crushed him for our iniquities (Isaiah 53) then the world witnessed true suffering. Piper comments on the reason for this suffering:

We have got to guard against falling prey to the world's idea that we deserve a life void of suffering and full of comfort.

...the ultimate reason that suffering exists in the universe is so that Christ might display the greatness of the glory of the grace of God by suffering in himself to overcome our suffering. The suffering of the utterly innocent and infinitely holy Son of God in the place of utterly undeserving sinners to bring us to everlasting joy is the great display of the glory of God's grace that ever was, or ever could be.

So in our suffering, we are driven to the Saviour.

Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Hebrews 2:17-18)

Brother, you will suffer if you follow Jesus. May God give you grace to flee all grumbling, to make much of Jesus, to identify with your sheep and to meet with him in your trials.