

The Goodness of God and Suffering

Galatians 5:22; Psalm 119:71

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The infinitely good God, our Creator, Provider, and Savior, wills that we suffer. I know that is not what the vast majority of professing Christians believe or want, but that is what God declares in the pages of Holy Scripture. In fact, our suffering in this life for Christ (whether it is persecution, whether it is bodily afflictions, whether it is abuse from others, whether it is hardships and trials of various kinds) is a gracious gift granted to you by a good God (Philippians 1:29). We are very willing to receive the gift of faith in Christ from our good God, but we would rather God keep His gift of suffering (or perhaps give it to someone else). However, our good God is not giving us something that He did not give to His Only Begotten Son; for even the Lord Jesus Himself learned obedience (i.e. the cost of obedience) through the things that He suffered (Hebrews 5:8).

Dear ones, God does not will or delight that we suffer for the sake of suffering itself (Lamentations 3:32-33). No, there is a good purpose in all of the suffering of His own beloved and adopted children—“that we might be partakers of His holiness” (Hebrews 12:10). Suffering is not fun. It is not pleasant. It takes us out of our comfort zone so that we might look outside of ourselves to Christ, who suffered as no man has suffered, might give us tender hearts and hard skin to the attacks of others, and so that we might remind ourselves that this world is not our home—our citizenship is in heaven.

Dear ones, holiness is learned from a study of Scripture, but practical holiness is learned in Christ’s school of suffering, for there is where the doctrine of holiness is applied. I don’t know all that you are suffering at

the present time, but I do know that an infinitely good God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) has ordained and is governing that suffering for your good, as this is the very testimony of David from our text. The main points for the sermon this Lord's Day are: (1) The History of Suffering (Genesis 2:16-17); and (2) The Good Benefit of Suffering (Psalm 119:71).

I. The History of Suffering (Genesis 2:16-17).

A. When did suffering begin in the history of this world? Was suffering always present? Did suffering evolve gradually through history? Was it simply a freak accident? Such questions actually have answers in the Word of God. Let's consider the answers our good and sovereign God gives to us in His own revelation of Himself in Holy Scripture.

1. The time in which suffering began is actually given to us in God's Word.

a. God declares that He created all things good in the space of six 24-hour days (Genesis 1:31). God created the first man, Adam, in His own image and created him upright (Ecclesiastes 7:29).

b. The Lord God then initiated and established a good covenant with the first man, Adam, by which Adam might enjoy a blessed relationship with His Creator and in which the Lord declared to Adam that the entire garden (and all of the trees within the garden) were his from which to eat, except one. From that one tree God commanded Adam that he was not to eat, and if he did eat, death would immediately follow (Genesis 2:16-17). Adam not only represented himself, but all his posterity (by ordinary generation). If he broke this covenant with God by eating of the forbidden fruit, he and all his posterity (by ordinary generation) would suffer the pain and misery of death, which is what occurred according to 1 Corinthians 15:22 (spiritual death from God, physical death from the body, and eternal death in hell). However, if Adam kept this covenant with God, he and all his posterity by ordinary

generation would enjoy the goodness and blessedness of everlasting life (Romans 7:10).

c. When Adam fell, God kept His word (which is not unfair, but is good and right) in giving to mankind what was deserved for their sin in Adam and their sin in themselves (Romans 3:23; Romans 6:23), and so God brought death and the miseries of this life upon mankind (Genesis 3:16-19—representative miseries: pain and sorrow in child birth, the earth cursed, eating by the sweat of the brow, death). Thus, all the miseries of this life can historically be traced back to God pouring forth upon mankind the morally good and righteous judgment which was deserved for the sin of man in breaking covenant with God, in the loss of man's original righteousness in which man was created, in the sinful nature of man, and in the many ways man daily sins against God by breaking His commandments.

d. Thus, suffering was not always present—it had a beginning. Suffering is not the result of evolution, but is rather the result of the direct judgment of God for sin. Suffering is not a freak accident of nature, but was foreordained by a good and sovereign God from eternity and was brought by this same good and sovereign God into history as an act of His divine justice upon mankind for sin.

B. Let's be clear. The miseries of this life (whether pain, sorrow, heartache, diseases, murder, wars, abuse, molestation, tyranny, natural disasters) are not out from under the control of God—He is absolutely good and sovereign. God's hands are not tied behind His back, wanting to prevent the misery in this world, but unable to do so. The misery of this world was introduced as God's temporal judgment for sin, which points man to God's eternal judgment for sin in a place of everlasting judgment and torment—hell (whereas the debt for breaking the temporal laws of man is temporal punishment, the debt for breaking the laws of the everlasting God is everlasting judgment). This is not unfair—this is simply

the good judgment of God being exercised against the sin and rebellion of man against Him and His holy commandments. This is not man's perverted judgment, but God absolutely righteous judgment.

1. What would we call a judge on earth who dismissed and set free the murderer, rapist, molester, and thief? A good judge or a wicked judge? I dare say, he would be a perverter of justice—not a defender of justice (Deuteronomy 27:19; Isaiah 5:20).

2. God is the supreme Judge and is absolutely righteous and will repay the sins of man (who have broken His good and holy law) as they justly deserve (Job 8:3; Nahum 1:3). There would be absolutely none of the misery that mankind suffers in this world had man not sinned against the good and righteous God who created him and if man did not continue to hate and despise this good and righteous God and His commandments, who yet provides every good gift that man enjoys in this life (Matthew 5:45; James 1:17). That, my friends, is the history of suffering in this life. Not a very pretty picture, but that is not the end of the story. Praise be to our good and gracious Savior.

II. The Good Benefit of Suffering (Psalm 119:71).

A. From what was just briefly detailed of the history of suffering in this world as being God's morally good and righteous judgment for sin, how does it come to be that David in Psalm 119:71 can speak of his afflictions and sufferings as good (both a moral good and a generous good to us from God—not an evil to us—not something neutral or indifferent to us—but a positive good to us—a means which God uses to channel His grace to us)? What has altered and changed the miseries and sufferings in this world from judgment to the unbeliever to a good benefit to the believer? Very simply the death of Jesus Christ has brought about this amazing change for the believer who trusts alone in Christ alone for his/her justification before God. Though death and the miseries

of this life are yet the judgment of God against sin for the unbeliever and a temporal preview of hell to come (as has been the case from the fall of Adam), death and the miseries of this life have been wondrously transformed from judgment to blessing for the believer. Let me explain.

1. The reason for mankind's judgment of misery and death (temporal and eternal) was because of sin and rebellion against God (as we have already seen). However, Jesus Christ ("the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" Revelation 13:8) was God's good and righteous Redeemer, who bore and paid for the sin of all God's elect who trust alone in Christ alone for their justification before God (Hebrews 9:28).

2. Thus, where sin is paid in full by Christ once and for all (which is what was accomplished at the cross according to John 19:30—"it is finished", or literally, "paid in full"), and where all God's retributive judgment against sin is fully satisfied once and for all (Galatians 3:13), all God's elect who trust alone in Christ alone never again shall know God's retributive judgment and punishment for their sin, but will only and ever know the loving discipline and chastening of a good Father who can only give what is good to His children (Hebrews 12:5-6).

3. And let me tell you, as one who has known the firm yet loving discipline of the Lord, it hurts—it's painful. But strong discipline is supposed to hurt, in order to move us from our sinful weaknesses to our growing and bearing (by the power of the Holy Spirit) the fruit of the Spirit (which is simply manifesting the DNA of Christ and growing in conformity to the image of Christ).

4. Old Testament believers looked ahead in faith to the cross of Christ even as New Testament believers look back in faith to the cross of Christ (Romans 4—Abraham and David). That is precisely why David can say that it was good that he suffered affliction—not because suffering is good in itself, but because God was no longer an angry Judge, looking for just retribution against David, but was now a reconciled and loving Father, who being infinitely good and infinitely wise was

disciplining David for his good that he might not wander away from Christ his first love into lukewarmness, into unfaithfulness, into disbelief, and into rebellion against the will of God for his life (Psalm 119:67), and that David might be taught by his afflictions and suffering to walk in loving obedience to God's good statutes and commandments (Psalm 119:71).

B. What are the good benefits of suffering in the lives of Christians?

1. Our suffering for the cause and righteousness of Christ is good because it is an evidence of our salvation (Philippians 1:28). Suffering for Christ may come from those we can see (even at times within our own family) or from those we cannot see (Satan's hatred for Job and God).

2. Our suffering for the cause and righteousness of Christ is good because it gives us reason to rejoice that we walking in a long line of those who have refused to move the landmarks of faithful doctrine, worship, government, and discipline (Matthew 5:10-12).

3. Our suffering is good because it humbles our heart and breaks us before God, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit we forsakes pride, self-righteousness, and all manner of sin, rather than becoming emboldened in our sin (Psalm 32:3-5; Psalm 119:67).

4. Our suffering is good because it takes us out of our comfort zone, out of our apathy, and out of our indifference to Christ. Suffering will reveal what is truly within us by sending us into the arms of Christ from a heart that is overwhelmed by His love and mercy or sending us away from Christ resentful and angry at what God has brought into our lives.

5. Our suffering is good because it reveals our weakness, and God's power (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). God gets all of the glory for what He does in our life when suffering reveals how weak we really are.

6. Our suffering is good because it teaches us how to comfort

others, who are passing through the vale of tears and the valley of the shadow of death (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). It produces a godly sympathy in our lives for others, rather than an indifference to the suffering of others.

7. Our suffering is good because it teaches us patience and waiting upon the Lord (Romans 5:3). It slows us down from our own deadlines which we place upon God in which He must act. Instead of running ahead of the Lord in presumption, our suffering will cause us to wait upon the Lord and to prayerfully consider our steps.

8. Our suffering is good because it prepares us for trying times that lay ahead of us (The enslavement of Joseph prepared him for his subsequent imprisonment which prepared him for ruling all of Egypt). Suffering by God's grace gives us a tender heart, but a hard skin when it comes to opposition and adversity. A comfortable Christianity will not stand in the face of strong opposition.

9. Our suffering for Christ is good because it blazes a path to follow for those who will come after us (Hebrews 11), and who will be blessed by our example in taking up our cross of suffering and following Christ even into the fiery furnace.

10. Our suffering is good because it reminds us that we are pilgrims passing through this world and that our everlasting treasure is reserved for us in heaven (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

Dear ones, suffering is hard, is painful, and is discouraging when you see no relief in sight. Our comfort and help in persevering and growing through our suffering can only come from trusting and hoping in our God who is infinitely good as to His very nature and who can only do us good through Christ, who suffered at the hand of His Father more than you or I will ever suffer, and He did so in order to show us His goodness now and for all eternity.

When we are in the midst of much suffering, let us look first to the

suffering of Christ and second to the suffering of others who are in far worse conditions of suffering in order that our suffering might be lost in praise of an infinitely good God who uses our suffering for our good.

Any suffering that will lead a man to obey God is a blessing and a favor. Any suffering that will lead a sinner to Christ is a gain to him. No matter what it may cost; no matter what he may be required to give up; no matter to what persecutions and troubles it may expose him; no matter what he may suffer, or how long he may suffer; whether poverty, hatred, toil, torture, or death—there will be everlasting thanksgiving upon the lips of one who is led by the suffering a good God has brought when the Christians stands rejoicing in what God has accomplished through suffering.

The godly and learned Jonathan Edwards died a painful death from small pox on March 22, 1758. His wife, Sarah, was ill herself when she received the news by letter. On April 3, she wrote to her daughter Esther:

What shall I say: A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may kiss the rod, and lay our hands on our mouths! The Lord has done it. He has made me adore his goodness that we had him so long. But my God lives; and he has my heart. O what a legacy my husband, and your father, has left to us! We are all given to God: and there I am and love to be. Your ever affectionate mother, Sarah Edwards.

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