

THE ENIGMA OF SUFFERING

Genesis 3:1-19

INTRO: I want to speak to us this morning on the enigma of suffering. To man, suffering is an enigma. It is a puzzle. To many, the question as to why people have to suffer is totally unanswerable. Many ask, if there is a God, or if God is good, why is life filled with trouble? Why is there suffering? Why are there so many problems in life? Why are there catastrophes? How can a good God allow such things as tsunamis or earth quakes, or droughts, or flooding? And if we don't have tsunamis or earthquakes, still we all experience adversity. Our suffering may be mental, as in depression; or it may be physical, still it is suffering. Why suffering? Maybe we ask such questions as why did my baby die? Why was my husband killed in that accident? Why, why, why? Is there an answer to such questions? Or does heaven have an answer?

Here a while ago, and I am no stranger to this, but I fell into a time when it seemed the sun would never shine again. I was so down. I felt like I had pain. I didn't want to go to work. I didn't even want to get out of bed. It seemed I just had to drag myself through life. In such times it seems you do well if you just hang on. You just hope you can go to sleep at night and be without that pain for a while, and maybe wake up in the morning and things will somehow have changed. May I ask you, do any of you ever feel like that? But that is yet only a very small difficulty. We may experience the death of a loved one, or some tragedy or other such things, and then comes a dark moment in our lives and we say, "Why Lord?" Eliphaz the Temanite, one of Job's miserable comforters, certainly was right about one thing when he said in Job 5:7, "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward."

Maybe some tragedy has happened, and it feels like life will never be normal again. Maybe it is now years later, and still, sometimes when you wake up everything is right there before you again. Maybe some circumstance has entered life that you simply wished would never have happened. But it did and there is nothing you can do to change it. And maybe you say, "Why God?" But all is silent, so it seems. There is no answer. Still this thing is there with you.

Maybe you have experienced financial loss or any other loss. No matter what it is, maybe you are still saying, "Oh, if only..." For some it might be the loss of a child. Why did we not get to the doctor on time? Why did that guy pull out right in front of

me? Why did I not see that? Why did I drive so fast? Why, why, why? If there is a God; if God is real; if God is good, why is life filled with so much suffering? And we feel like this and we live in a world of peace compared to many others. There are countries where the pain is so horrendous we would find it hard to endure hearing it told. The suffering in some countries is indescribably horrible. And yet, all seems silent as to the reasons why all this is happening.

And maybe you have experienced pain and you have talked to others, and they have tried to encourage you with the words, "All things work together for good to those who love God." But you can see there is no depth to their words. You can tell they have not experienced much of life, and maybe their answer seems trite and maybe it wants to make you bitter. How can they say such things? Life! Trouble! Sorrow! Death! Pain! Suffering! Oh, why God?

I am not saying I can answer all those 'whys'. I can't even answer all of my own why's. But I can give us a few things that might help out a little. You see, all things DO work together for good to those who love God. It is true. No matter how little the person who said that to you has experienced of life, it is still true. So, let us look at this matter from a biblical perspective.

My wife and I were listening to Ravi Zacharias a while ago and he told of young lady that could not feel pain. And what did the mother of that child pray for? That her daughter might be able to feel pain. Every moment of life she was in jeopardy of death simply because she could not feel pain. Could it be like that with suffering?

Well, we are introduced to the problem of suffering in the Garden of Eden. When God had created everything, and He looked around and saw it all, and Scripture says, "...indeed it was very good." There was no pain at that time. Then God created Adam and Eve, and because they were to be the crown of God's glory, God made them in such a way that they had a free will, in order that they could glorify Him and recognize His glory. And to make that free will of value, He set out for them that which they were to do and that which they were not to do. You know the history well. They chose to do that which they were not to do. They ate of the forbidden tree. It was this choice made by man that is the key reason for all pain and suffering.

And this morning I want to suggest the two major reasons I find why this life is filled with pain and suffering and trouble. I will give you those points as we go along.

I. TO SAVE US

So our question is, why does God allow suffering? If God is good, how can He allow so much suffering? We have mentioned already that Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden. I want to propose to you first of all, though I will not take time to explain that proposition in this message, that God allows suffering because without suffering all mankind would go to hell. Nobody would consider salvation if it were not for the trials of life. The only thing in mankind's life that has the potential to lead him to salvation is suffering. I propose that the raw truth, if there were no suffering, would not do it. If God poured out His goodness on man without there being any suffering, all mankind would reject Him and live for themselves.

In Genesis 3:1-7 we have the account of Adam and Eve eating from the forbidden tree. So look at what happened after man sinned as we find it in Genesis 3:8-19 (read). After Satan deceived Eve, God dealt with him by cursing him. But He did not deal with man by cursing him. He blessed them. He blessed them with trouble and suffering! Look at verse 16 (read). There is a reason why the NT says a woman will be saved in childbearing. She does not get saved because she bears children; she gets saved in child bearing. I have done a message on that which is available on sermonaudio.com/lhec.

But look at what God said to Adam in verses 17-19 (read). You see, God said, "Cursed is the ground *for your sake*." What He is saying is I cursed the ground for your benefit. You see, to Satan He said, "You are cursed..." To Adam He said, "Cursed is the ground for your sake..." So Romans 8 says all of creation groans and travails together until now. And it tells us the whole creation which is suffering because of man's sin, is waiting for the time when man will be resurrected. And why is creation waiting for this? Because then the world will be released from this curse.

And why did God curse the ground? In order that man, through suffering and pain and trials and problems would seek Him. It is simply amazing to me that all of life's

trials are the major reason why most people get saved. Watch what happens when some tragedy or something horrible happens before ungodly people, and many times their first response will be, "O my God!" In a split second, their mind has gone to the One in whom they don't even believe.

I have asked this question in many places: How many of you came to Christ because life at that time life was so good you just had to deal with your sins? You said, "You, know if life can be this good, I've got to get saved." And then I ask: How many of you got saved because of some tragedy; somebody died; somebody was killed; some problem had you at the end of yourself or maybe something like 9/11 took place? And that question receives by far the most responses. Amazing, is it not?

Listen to this testimony of a Jew who suffered under the wrath of Adolf Hitler. He said, "I am one of the Jews who escaped from Germany. I thank God for all the strokes with which I was driven from darkness to light. It is better that we arrive beaten and bleeding at the glorious goal than that we decay happily and contentedly in darkness. As long as things were all right with us, we did not know anything of God, anything of the salvation of our souls and the world beyond. Hitler's arrows and our misery have led us to reality. We have lost our earthly home, but have found our heavenly one. We have lost our economic support, but have won the friendship of the ravens of Elijah. On the bitter ways of emigration we have found Jesus, the Riches of all worlds" (LEM Abandoned to Christ, pg. 79).

I would propose that if we had no trials in life, no news would be good enough; no truth would be strong enough and no goodness would be great enough to draw us to confess and forsake our sins. We would simply not get saved. We would all go to hell. No person ever truly gets saved who does not first bend his stiff neck and proud knees before God Almighty and acknowledges that he or she is a sinner and in desperate need of Christ in order to be saved. It does not happen; ever. Man's greatest potential but also his greatest liability is pride. And it is generally life's difficulties that prepare us to overcome our pride and hear from God.

For those of you who watch Israel and their battle with Islam, you probably feel like I do sometimes: "Lord, why don't you step in? How do You allow all this unrighteousness? How can these terrorists get away with using their own people as human shields and the world sides with them? Why don't You step in Lord?" But when I

do that I am asking the wrong question. If God stepped in now and Israel had peace, I believe they would never turn to the real Messiah. Even now, most of them fiercely reject the true Messiah. The problem lies not with God.

So, I propose that the first major purpose why God allowed pain and sorrow and suffering into life after the fall of man is to turn us back to Him. These things prepare us for him and His salvation.

II. TO SANCTIFY US

That brings us to our second point. If God allows suffering into our lives so that we will get saved, how is it then that after a person gets saved that suffering does not cease? Surely, if suffering is to bring us to salvation, then suffering should stop after we get saved. Well, that sounds like our present day prosperity Gospel; or those who think a Christian should not get sick and if he does he must have some unconfessed sin in his life. Why does God allow Christians to suffer? Why does He not put an end to all that when a person gets saved? Let me first assure you that if that was the wisest thing to do, God would do it. But instead, what He is allowing is the wisest thing there is to do.

So, consider this. If a Christian should be delivered from pain and suffering as soon as he gets saved, people would want to get saved for the benefits in the here and now. They would not seek salvation because of their own sinfulness. But there are much more important reasons. The fact remains that when a person gets saved, not much change has taken place in their lives yet. Something has happened in their hearts, but not much has happened in their day to day life. They have become humble before God and confessed their sins and believed in Christ's finished work on the cross, but not much else has changed except their mind. And now that they are saved, God will set about to deliver the new believer from sin. When we get saved we have immediately been delivered from the penalty of sin. But deliverance from the power of sin will take a life-time. And this deliverance from the power of sin is called sanctification. So the first purpose God allows us to suffer is so to bring us to salvation. The second purpose is to work sanctification in us. God wants to make us holy. The process of making us holy is called sanctification. This is a long process. We can become positionally holy in a day; but becoming practically holy

takes a life-time. And the purpose of this lengthy process is to make us like Christ.

When Christ was about to be born, the angel told Joseph, Mary's husband to call His name Jesus, that is Savior (Matt. 1:21). And the reason for that name, as the angel said, was because, and I quote, "He will save His people from their sins." That is sanctification. When those who stole steal no more because they got saved, that is sanctification. Hebrews 12:14 says that without holiness no one will see the Lord. So, in order to bring about holiness, the Lord allows us to live and experience life, and in life; trials and problems and testings and suffering.

And this matter of God's seeking to bring man into conformity to the image of Christ, or sanctification, is a very huge matter. Scripture tells us that our hearts are desperately wicked. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?" Our heart is so bad, we ourselves cannot know it. Jeremiah 13:23 says, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? *Then* may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil." How impossible is it for the leopard to changes his spots? Well, it is hopelessly impossible. Just so, it is impossible for us to change our hearts. Isaiah 64:6, says, "But we are all like an unclean *thing*, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; We all fade as a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, Have taken us away."

Now you may say, "Listen, that is talking about unbelievers. Surely Christians are not like that." Then a great giant of a Christian, A. W. Tozer, was wrong about himself. Then D. Martyn Lloyd Jones was wrong about himself. If you and I think our hearts are not like those verses describe them, then we are in need of an education about ourselves.

It is an amazing thing how quickly those who become Christians can degenerate. It is amazing the subtle ways Satan has of misleading Christians. It is amazing how easily we succumb to certain kinds of temptations. And in our Christian lives, if we do not experience adversity, we can very easily and very quickly be led off the path. And if God wants us to be conformed to the image of His Son, one thing that must remain with us is suffering.

And so, one of the things God will use as much, if not more in the life of the believer than the unbeliever is suffering; trials; troubles; difficulties; adversities; affliction etc.. And so, I want to show us how God uses these trials and troubles to sanctify us.

A. By Chastening Us

So, we might now well ask: How then does God sanctify us through allowing difficult circumstances or suffering into our lives? Well, first, by allowing such things into our lives God may be spanking us. Sometimes we, as Christians, become disobedient to the Lord. When I was a young boy, at one time a lot of difficult things began to happen to us. I think some cattle died. A horse died. Our church attendance was very poor. And one thing after another went wrong. And I remember my mother saying, "It is because of how we are living." She recognized that sometimes God has to spank us. We could give numerous examples from the children of Israel in the wilderness or from David or others. You see, there may come times in our lives when we do not live right. We may know we are not living right. And there come times in the lives of believers when God chastens us or spans us, so to speak, by allowing suffering into our lives. This may come in a myriad of different forms, but it is chastening. It is a spiritual spanking.

Listen to 1 Corinthians 11:32, "But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world." Here we have a very clear reason why some believers suffer. The Lord spans us in order that we might not be condemned with the world. If we did not suffer in such times, it is very likely Satan would overcome us.

You see, we may slowly, without noticing it, move away from God. Maybe we fail to read our Bibles. Maybe we begin to pray by rote. We are not mindful of what we are praying. And slowly we may become lackadaisical. And soon we are missing church. And then we get caught up with fishing or hunting or sewing or whatever else there may be that can derail us. Or maybe we get caught up with work and it drags us from what we know we should be doing. Or maybe we become proud; it could even be spiritual pride; or if things go well too long we might become self sufficient. Or maybe it may even come to where we begin to dabble in some sin. And when the Lord sees what is

happening, He may allow into our lives some suffering to get our attention. Maybe we have some accident or we get sick, or whatever else, and of a sudden we are brought up short and we realize we have left the Lord.

The Psalmist said in 119:67, "Before I was afflicted I went astray." He had strayed away from the Lord. And like a good shepherd does to his sheep, the Lord allowed him to be afflicted. And after he was afflicted and had suffered for a while, then he said, "But now I have kept Your Word."

Go with me to Hebrews 12 (read 3-11). Now consider this. If we never experience chastising, we might well look at ourselves and say, "Am I really saved?" And sometimes when we are afflicted we misread God's purpose and we say, "Are we really saved?" Well, that affliction just may be an evidence that we are truly saved.

I spoke with a person recently who said he had been allowed to see the accounts receivable of a certain business in our town. He said something to the effect of you would not believe it unless you saw it. The outstanding accounts of people who did not pay was unbelievable. Does that include folk from this church? And if it does, may God graciously allow some suffering, some trouble, some affliction into such lives. This kind of thing should never be named among Christians, but it is. Jesus said in Revelation 3:19, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent."

But paying bills is only one area in which we ought to live right. I wonder if you have ever heard me say this before? "Live Right!?" In business, whether you are the buyer or the seller, live right. When you buy something that you cannot pay for, you have made an agreement, by buying it to pay for it. Keep your agreements.

Now there is something very encouraging about living right. If you live right, and you suffer affliction, then you know it is not because of that.

B. By Allowing Us To be Sifted

Let me give another reason why God may allow difficult circumstances or trying circumstances into our lives. When we become Christians, at some point in our lives the Lord

will allow us to be sifted by the devil. If we fall through the cracks, we fail God. But God is very merciful. He knows how we feel. And He is gracious. He grants to us that which we do not deserve. And if we fail God and repent, He will use that failure to show us who we truly are. Consider the Apostle Peter. He had walked with the Lord for a few years and as Christ neared the cross He warned the disciples that He must die. And He said, "I am going away and you cannot follow Me now." And Peter said, "Why can't I follow You? I will lay down my life for You!" Jesus said, "You know Peter, I have some news for you. Tonight you will ALL be offended because of Me." And Peter said, "Lord, You may be speaking of the rest, but I will never be offended because of You. You can count on me." And in Luke 21:31 Jesus said, "Simon, Simon, behold Satan has desired to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you. And when you are converted, strengthen your brethren."

That night Jesus was betrayed by Judas. And that night, as Jesus was being tried before the courts, Peter denied Christ; not once, not twice, but three times. And when he had denied Christ the third time, Christ turned and looked at him, and somewhere out in the distance a rooster crowed. And Peter remembered his brave words and he went outside and wept bitterly. Just hours earlier he had said he would never do this. Now he had failed. Satan had desired to have him to sift him as wheat. Satan thought Peter would fall through the cracks and be gone. But though Peter failed, he repented and came back. He got stronger and grew spiritually and became a giant for God. You see, God allows some things into our lives for a purpose.

Could it be that when we think we stand, we get sifted? Does Satan know when we think we are something spiritually? Scripture says when you think you stand, take heed lest you fall.

C. By Removing Spiritual Tumors

So God allows various kinds of adversity into our lives for various reasons. Sometimes, the Lord, in His great efforts to conform us to the image of His Son, notices a spiritual tumor is growing in us. Such a tumor is very dangerous. It may take the greatest of Christians down. And when He sees that, He may well seek to make us willing to deal with it by pain or suffering. God will go to great

lengths to remove such tumors. The danger of these tumors is that they may be growing within us and we are not at all aware of it. Subtle Satan has found a hidden pocket in our hearts into which he has climbed and from which he seeks to destroy us. And we are unaware of what is happening. And God, in His great mercy allows trouble into our lives to save us from that which would ultimately destroy us.

I would give Job, of the OT, as an example of this. It is my analysis of the book that a deadly cancerous tumor was growing in the soul of this most righteous man, and he was all unaware of it. As a matter of fact, he was feeling quite good about himself. And in that state is where Satan got a hold in him and Job was unaware of it. And God allowed Satan to do some devastating damage in his life. He lost his possessions, his family and even his wife turned against him and said, "Curse God and die."

But he was a very righteous man, and like Peter, he did not lie down and die. You see, God will not easily let a man like this go. And so He allowed Satan to buffet him to a degree few would be able to take and still he trusted God. Oh, Job felt sorry for himself. Turn to Job 23. He said, "Oh, if I could come into His presence, I would tell Him a thing or two" (read 1-5). I wonder, do you feel like that sometimes?

Well, God is patient; very patient. And when, after a long time of buffeting, He sensed the time was right, God gave Job that opportunity he had wished for. But instead of Job asking God a thing or two, it was God that asked of Job a thing or two. Well, maybe it was more like 42. The Lord asks Job one question after another, but there is no answer. Job has no answers. And still God asks on. And when God is done asking, look at chapter 40 (read 1-5). And then, in the following chapters God reveals the tumor that has been the cause of all this suffering and that God has been wishing to remove. It is the tumor of spiritual pride. It is the worst kind of tumor there is. It is the tumor of self-righteousness. And when God is done, look at what Job says in chapter 42 (read 1-6).

Oh what pain Job went through! What suffering! And when all his righteousness lay as filthy rags in the dust at his feet, and he abhorred himself, and he repented in dust and ashes, Job was healed of his tumor. And in the rest of the chapter we have a revived and a restored Job. But

without pain and trials and troubles, he might well have ended up in hell.

D. By Pruning

Well, let me give yet one more reason why suffering may be part of the Christian's existence. The Lord seeks to conform us to the image of His Son by pruning us so that we will bear fruit. Consider in this light John 15 (read 1-9). I am not a horticulturalist. I do not know much about pruning. One of my Bible teachers told us of a time when they had Philip Keller at the school. Philip Keller was an expert at illustrations. And he said that Keller brought a certain kind of branch or part of a tree, and he taught from John 15. And as he was teaching he was pruning this branch. And when he was done, much of the branch had been cut away and lay at his feet and of what he had left in his hand he said something like this, "This is what has to happen before it will bear much fruit."

It seems that even trees have to suffer to become fruitful. When the iron curtain went down in Russia many packages of Bibles and commentaries were sent into Russia. We were given addresses of families in need of Bibles and commentaries and we sent several packages as well. And we got a letter in response from a woman with a name as Mennonite as we are. And in her letter she said, something like this: "Perhaps we here in Russia have suffered in order that we might bear fruit." Then she said they had several apple trees in their yard. But the trees were not bearing fruit. And when they built a fence, they used one of the trees for a fence post, since it was not bearing fruit anyway. They drove big spikes into the tree to hold the fence and the next year that tree began to bear. So she told her husband, perhaps we should nail some big nails into the other tree as well.

Well, sometimes we must go through some suffering before we are fruitful. I am always amazed that God can accomplish such things by allowing suffering into the lives of Christians.

E. By Testing Our Faith

Let me mention one more area God will use suffering in order bring about sanctification in the Christian. We go to First Peter (read 3-9). I have given you a message on this passage. It is available on sermonaudio.com/lhec called, "The Crucible Of Trials." Another way the Lord

uses trials or difficulties or suffering to conform us to the image of His Son is by testing our faith.

By salvation, the Lord has brought us forth to a living hope. Our church name comes from this passage. The Lord has brought us forth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to an inheritance that is incorruptible; that is undefiled; that does not fade away; and which is reserved in heaven for us. And shortly we will partake of that inheritance. The apostle then says, "In this (i.e. salvation) you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials."

The Apostle Peter will then explain why God allows these trials, but before we go to that, let me remind us of something. Many times it is the devil himself who is allowed to bring these troubles on us. In the case of Job, God allowed Satan to send all these troubles to Job. In the case of Peter, Jesus said, "Satan has desired to have you." And God allows Satan certain rights and certain lengths to which he may trouble us. But in the case of Job He said, "You may do as you wish with Job, only do not lay a hand on him" (Job 1:12). You see, Satan can go no further than God will allow him to. God promises in 1 Corinthians 10:13 not to allow Satan to tempt us beyond what we are able to bear.

But we go back to 1 Peter 1 to see the purpose for these trials God allows into our lives. Peter says in verse seven that these trials are for this purpose, "...that the genuineness of your faith...may be found to praise, honor and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

I want us to notice a few things about these trials and difficulties the Christian experiences. First, they are but for a little while. If you should stretch out a line around this globe, some 40,000 kilometers and you would draw a thin pencil line across that line, so thin that you had to have a microscope to see it, you would have a little idea of what is meant by 'a little while.' It is now; it is for a little while that we go through these trials.

Second, notice that the genuineness of our faith is compared to the value of gold. In gold we have one of the most valuable of all commodities found on this planet. And the Lord uses it to show us something of the value of

genuine faith. Now, gold is used as a comparison but it is insufficient to show us the value God places on genuine faith. So Peter says the genuineness of our faith is MORE precious than gold that perishes! Well, you might ask, "How much more valuable is genuine faith than gold that perishes?" And the answer is, "Much more!"

It is now, in later years that I am beginning to see what glory God gets out of a person that trusts Him. And God will go to great lengths to deepen our faith. One of these days I must do a message or two on faith itself. What a treasure to God it is. It is not our feelings, it is our faith that is so very crucial to Him. He wants us to trust Him in spite of our feelings. And so, He may allow suffering into our lives for that purpose.

CONCL: And so we conclude on our subject, the enigma of suffering? Why does God allow suffering? Well, suffering first entered man's existence because of the sin of Adam and Eve. And God, who is merciful and loving and gracious, longed to see man restored to Himself. And in order to bring that about, He allowed suffering into mankind's existence. The very first purpose, as I see it, is to use suffering to prepare us for salvation. If it were not for suffering, none would be saved.

But after a person gets saved, when one would think suffering should be over, we find it a part of the life as the saved as well. And I have come to the conclusion that God allows suffering in the lives of believers in order to conform them to the image of His Son. So the first purpose is initial salvation. The second purpose is ongoing salvation, or sanctification. It is to make us holy. Without holiness, Scripture says, no man will see the Lord.

And we have given four ways this morning that God uses suffering to conform us to the image of Christ. First, God seeks to sanctify us by chastising us. God allows us to be chastised by painful things in order to correct us when we are straying from Him. Second, he seeks to conform us to the image of Christ by allowing Satan to sift us, as he did the Apostle Peter. And Peter eventually came out of those trials a more purified Christian. Third, God allows us to suffer to conform us to the image of Christ by pruning us. We may be fruitless Christians, and God allows us to be pruned. God begins to cut things and it is painful. But unless we are pruned, we remain fruitless. And last, we saw that God allows trials into our lives in order that the genuineness of our faith may be tested.

And so we see that suffering has great value. If it were not for suffering, I expect we would all go to hell.