

## “Suffering”

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Mark 11.27-33/ John 9.1-12  
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As we well know lent it is a time of preparation and repentance in which we remember Jesus' suffering and anticipate his resurrection.

The question you often hear is, “What did you give up for Lent?” Throughout history, Christians have observed Lent by fasting or other acts of self-denial. The danger with tradition, of course, is that it can become mere ritual, or even a source of pride. We want to recapture a spirit of faith in this season.

Unlike repentance and humility, which happen in and through us, suffering and persecution simply happen to us. The former is a response of faith to the grace of God at work. The latter requires a response of faith in the goodness and wisdom of God, even when it seems he is not at work.

The subject raises a difficult question: Why does God allow us to suffer? We are always searching for answers to this question, for ourselves and for our world. Not knowing “why” is part of the suffering.

One day when Jesus and his disciples were walking, they passed by a man blind from birth. “And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). They were looking for answers.

Based upon God's covenant promises with Israel, Jews were inclined to expect God to invariably bless them materially in response to pious living. Conversely, they expected that those who did evil were to experience divine discipline in various forms. In short, they expected God to bless them for doing good, and to punish others for their sin.

We see this mindset revealed by Job's friends in the book of Job. In truth, Job was being tested with adversity because of his piety, and not because of sin (Job 1:1-12). Job's friends persisted in trying to force him to confess that his suffering was the result of some sin he had committed. If he but forsook his sin, they insisted, then God would again bless him.

Perhaps Asaph had the same assumptions about prosperity and poverty. He was frustrated and angry with God because the wicked appeared to prosper while the pious did not (Psalm 73:1-14).

This is why the disciples framed the question the way they did. Their explanation for suffering was that someone was being punished for sin. But Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3).

Jesus was not offering a trite explanation of all suffering, but rather pointing to his own suffering that would explain the love of God. Jesus voluntarily and unjustly endured suffering, even unto death. Not because he sinned, but because "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). He did this so that the works of God might be displayed in him, "whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (3:25-26).

When we try to make sense of suffering, we can end up in the same dilemma. On one hand, we know that our hardships and afflictions are relatively insignificant compared to what we see around us. On the other hand, we cannot deny that we get sick, stretched, slandered, and snubbed. Privileged as we are, we feel burdened by my circumstances and frustrated with our struggle against sin.

So how are we to view the various forms of hardship and trial that we face? What is the relationship between our faith and suffering?

Some teach that Jesus suffered so we wouldn't have to, but an honest assessment is that no one escapes suffering in a fallen world. It is more than physical hardship. It's also emotional pain, relational woes, soul unrest, and spiritual attack. Jesus' death does not take away our suffering, but it gives profound meaning and purpose to it.

Consider James' exhortation to those who suffer: "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).

I said previously that suffering happens to us. We cannot control our circumstances, but we can control how we think about them. Knowing how to interpret events and actions is a large part of wisdom, and the faithful attitude of the Christian is one of joy.

We can rejoice on two accounts. First, suffering provides a context for our faith to mature. The “trials of various kinds” represent the pressures of life that threaten our sense of well-being. When we are sick or stuck or grieved, we tend to doubt God’s sovereignty and goodness in our lives.

Every test of our body or mind or emotion is fundamentally a “testing of our faith”. In other words, the quality of our faith is proven in suffering, tested and shown to be genuine. In the way that an object is proven to be gold in the fire, the “proof” of our faith is in the “fiery trial” (1 Peter 4:12). Whether we are talking about common adversities or more acute hardships, we can embrace and even rejoice in suffering because we know that it produces character and hope and maturity (Romans 5:3, James 1:2-4).

Second, suffering focuses our hope on the consummation of all things, when God “will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore” (Revelation 21:4). Just as Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before him (Hebrew 12:2), so too we look to the day when the steadfast will receive the crown of life (James 1:12).

Wisdom, suffering, and maturity are all bound together in the person and work of Christ. He “became to us wisdom from God” (1 Corinthians 1:30), and he was “made perfect through suffering” (Hebrews 2:10). So then: we are justified by Christ’s suffering and sanctified by ours. By this we are reminded that suffering is not a setback to our agendas, but rather an orientation to God’s agenda, which is to form the character of Christ in us.

We do not have all the answers about why we suffer, but we do know what the answer cannot be. It cannot be that God doesn’t see or care, for he sent his own Son to enter into our suffering.

Ultimately, God does not ask us to explain suffering. He asks us to rejoice in it and endure it.