

# OpenTheo

## Transformation Through Suffering (Part 1)



### **Cultivating Christian Character** - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses the theme of suffering as a means of transformation in Christian character according to 2 Corinthians 3:18. Gregg emphasizes the importance of suffering in building character and shaping believers into the image of Christ. He explains that while suffering can be painful, it yields peaceful fruit of righteousness and prepares Christians for compassionate service. Suffering is also seen as God's way of disciplining believers to bring them to maturity and to trust in Him.

### **Transcript**

Tonight we're going to have our final lesson in a series that we've been doing for several weeks on the cultivation of Christian character. Tonight we'll be talking about how character is carved by affliction. We haven't really talked much about affliction or suffering in this series yet, and yet it's so, so much at the core of how God works in us to reproduce Christ in us, as Paul put it.

When Paul said, my little children, with whom I travail again in birth until Christ is formed in you. In Galatians 4.19. God desires that Christ, His likeness, be formed in us. That's why we're still here.

Do you ever wonder why, when God saves people, He doesn't just rapture them instantly to make sure they don't fall away or get in trouble? He keeps us here in this dangerous world. But He does it for a couple of reasons. One, of course, is for us to serve Him.

I mean, we're here to evangelize the rest of the world. But there's another reason that many Christians are not aware of. He's left us here because we need it.

That is to say, we need the conflict. We need the affliction. We need the chisel.

Because we are to be shaped into the image of Christ, according to many passages of Scripture. One we've looked at many times, 2 Corinthians 3.18, that we all, with unveiled faces, beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed from glory to glory into that same image, even as by the Spirit of the Lord. Now, last time we talked about what is meant by the glory of the Lord.

We're beholding the glory of the Lord and we're changed from glory to glory into the image of that glory. And I shared last time, at length, how the Scriptures seem to, at least in many places, equate or closely associate the concept of the glory of the Lord and the image of Christ Himself. Paul said in Colossians 3.4, when Christ, who is our life, shall appear, we also shall appear with Him in glory.

John, speaking of the same thing in 1 John 3, said, little children, now we are the sons of God. And it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He shall appear, we shall be like Him. For we shall seem as He is.

We will be like Him. We will appear with Him in glory. Or, as Paul put it in Romans 8.29, he says, Whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed into the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn of many brethren.

Conveying the same thought, in Hebrews 2, in verse 5, I think, or 10, excuse me, if I don't have the verse right. It's in Hebrews 2.10. The writer says, It pleased Him, or it suited Him, in bringing many sons to glory. See, in Romans 8.29, it's to make many sons be conformed to the image of Him.

In Hebrews, it's bringing many sons to glory. The glory is the image of Christ. And we have, we talked about that at length last time.

I only review for the sake of those who were not here. I made a grotesque mistake in making these notes. I only realized it after I printed them up.

And that is, I left out probably the most important scriptures that would connect what we have to talk about tonight, with what we talked about last time. Now, not to say there's any lack of scriptures in these notes. But, looking at these notes, this could be a stand-alone topic, and it is.

But, it follows quite, it dovetails perfectly with the idea of the glory that we were talking about last time. Because, Paul said in Romans 8.18, he says that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us. Again, that image of Christ that will be revealed in us, the glory that will be revealed in us.

He says the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with that glory. Well, what's the connection? Sufferings, glory. Well, the connection is this.

It's in 2 Corinthians chapter 4, and verse 18, I believe it is, or 17, it's 18. Paul says, for our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. Now, did you catch that connection? Our light affliction, which is but for a moment.

Notice the contrast between the affliction and the glory. The affliction is light. The glory

is a weight of glory.

The affliction is but for a moment. The glory is eternal. Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

So, the affliction works the glory. Now, I brought this up previously, but if you wish to sculpt something, let's say you want to sculpt a statue of a person, what you do is you take a great big block of marble, and you take a chisel and a hammer, and you simply take that marble, and you chip away everything that doesn't look like a person. That's how you sculpt something.

You just chip away everything that doesn't look like what you're making. And you leave the parts that do. Well, when God is shaping us into the image of Christ, it is not really dissimilar.

As a matter of fact, the scripture even refers to us as stones, living stones, although the imagery is not of sculpting, but of building a spiritual house. Nonetheless, Peter was called a stone. We are living stones.

And God is wishing to shape us into the image of Christ. In order to do this, He must chip away whatever doesn't look like Christ in us. How is this done? Well, I don't want to oversimplify it.

That's why we've taken eight sessions to talk about this, how this is done. It's done partly by the cultivation of the Word of God. When we study the Word, when we meditate on it day and night, when we obey it.

This has, of course, a very profound effect in changing us. It has to do with walking in the spirit. We're changed from glory to glory into that image as by the spirit of the Lord.

Paul said the Holy Spirit has a role. The Word of God has a role. But suffering also has a role, which is particularly seen when we actually think in terms of a sculpture, because there has to be a chisel and a hammer to chip away those things that are not Christlike.

And chiseling of living stones is painful. You sculpt a regular stone, it doesn't feel a thing. It makes a lot of noise, but it doesn't feel a thing.

But God desires for us to be shaped stones. As a matter of fact, going to Peter's illustration of us being stones in 1 Peter 2 and verse 5, he says we all as living stones are built together into a spiritual house. He's talking about a temple.

You know, in our dispensation, in our age, God does not dwell in temples made with hands. He dwells in a temple made of people. The church, the people of God, is the temple of God, said Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 3. And Peter said just the same thing.

That we as individual Christians are like living stones being built together, built up into a

holy temple, into a spiritual house. Or Paul put it in Ephesians a little differently. He said that we are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building fitly framed is growing into a holy temple in the Lord.

So God's temple today is made of human beings and we are them. We're it and we're the stones into which this building is made. Something I find interesting because I believe that the temple in the Old Testament that Solomon built is no doubt intended as a type and a shadow of the spiritual temple, the church.

If you read in 1 Kings the story of how Solomon built the temple, you'll read in chapter seven that the stones which were used in building Solomon's temple were shaped at the quarry. They were not. They were not brought to the temple site and then carved into the proper shape.

They were chiseled and perfected at the quarry. It says so that there would not be the sound of an axe or a saw or a hammer at the temple site. Apparently, the temple site where it was to ultimately be assembled was to be permanently tranquil.

And so all that noise that was made by shaping and perfecting the stones had to be take place at the quarry. After the stones were shaped, then they were taken to the temple site and assembled. We are the stones of the spiritual temple.

This world is the quarry. This is where God quarried us out. This is where he mined us.

And he doesn't just take us right to heaven. That's where the assembly takes place. It's supposed to be tranquil there.

All this chipping and chiseling and the groaning and complaining and so forth that Christians do, that doesn't have any place in heaven. So that all has to take place here. And the chiseling and the shaping has to be done here.

You know, it is said of Solomon's temple that the marble stones from which it was made were so smooth, their edges were so perfected that it was unnecessary to use any mortar between the stones. No air, not a wisp of air could get through the cracks. The stones were perfectly smooth.

And no doubt, again, I mean, depends on how far we want to press the tights. It suggests that God is seeking a high degree of change, of transformation in us before assembly time. Now, we will probably disagree among ourselves as to how far we need to get along that process before Jesus assembles things.

But we can see, notwithstanding any disagreements we have on that point, we can see that God is doing something in the meantime. He is gathering stones from the quarry and he's shaping them, he's chiseling them. He is knocking away the things that don't

belong there so that they can be assembled, so that we can be assembled into a holy temple in the Lord.

So this is what suffering is to do in us. It is there as the process by which God carves us and shapes us and changes us into the image of Jesus. It's only one of the processes.

As I said, I don't want to make it sound like suffering alone somehow does the whole work. Because many people who aren't even Christians suffer a great deal and don't change into the image of Christ. And sadly, even some Christians suffer a great deal and don't seem to get better, they seem to get bitter.

They don't get more like Jesus, they seem to get less like him. It should be obvious to us that suffering does not automatically and of itself bring about a transformation of character. But in the hands of God, and I believe with the right biblical response to the subject of suffering, the Christian is brought further along the way to the likeness of Christ by suffering which is coming from the hand of God.

Through instruments, perhaps those instruments are wicked people, perhaps it's the devil himself, as in the case of Job. I mean, the devil himself afflicted Job, but who really sensed his sufferings? Job knew, he said, the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. He didn't say the Lord gives and the devil takes away.

The sufferings that Job endured, he attributed to God. Now, some people say, well, he just wasn't very enlightened, he didn't have a Bible. He didn't know that God doesn't do that kind of stuff.

He didn't know the devil was in it. Oh, he probably didn't know the devil was in it. But you know what's interesting? When he said the Lord gives and the Lord takes away, the next sentence says, in all this Job did not sin with his mouth or charge God wrongly.

So, notwithstanding Job's biblical illiteracy, he was not theologically incorrect. He was right when he said the Lord is the one who gave, the Lord is the one who took away. That's a very important person to know.

We'll come back to that. Let's go through the material that I've given you. I often have people ask me, how can a good and loving God allow people to go through so much suffering? The world is obviously the sphere of a great deal of suffering and of quite a variety of kinds.

And it doesn't only happen to people who seem to deserve it. It doesn't only happen to bad people. It seems to happen as much to good people, to Christians, godly Christians.

Jesus was extremely godly. Look how he suffered. Paul was godly.

Look how he suffered. All the apostles, or you just go through church history and you'll

find that those who died, tortured, were martyred, lived in poverty, traveled around in goatskins and caves and dens of the earth, these were not the carnal people in the church. These weren't the backslid ones.

These are the ones, in many cases, who were the cream of the people of God. And yet, he allowed them to suffer so much. And when people say, how can a good God, if he really is all-powerful and all-loving, how can he allow suffering? Many people, I found, have great difficulty answering that question.

Many Christians almost get embarrassed by it. You believe God's all-loving? Yes. You believe God's all-powerful? Yes.

Well, how can he allow suffering then? If he's all-loving, he wouldn't want us to suffer. And if he's all-powerful, he'd be able to keep us from suffering. So, if he wants us to suffer, then he must not be all-loving.

And if he doesn't want us to suffer, he must not be all-powerful, because we're suffering and he doesn't want us to. So, this is supposed to be a big-time theological conundrum that embarrasses Christians. Frankly, I don't find it a problem at all.

The problem, I find, is in the presupposition. The presupposition is this. Suffering is bad.

And therefore, if suffering is bad, then a good God who is all-powerful wouldn't allow it. But suppose we change our perspective and be more biblical. Suffering is not always bad.

Suffering can be very good. In Psalm 119, in verse 71, the psalmist said, It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn your statutes. Now, that's a positive attitude.

It's good for me that I have been afflicted. Now, I must confess, I have not been greatly afflicted. I probably have been more than some of you, but I also probably have been less than many of you.

I'm not, you know, a paragon of great patience having gone through marvelous sufferings. I have not. There are people like that.

I read their biographies. I read of them. There are marvels of grace who have gone through great suffering.

I cannot number myself among them. Though I will say the things I have suffered at times have been severe. And I have had, in other words, what I'm going to share with you tonight is not theory merely.

The truth of the scripture that I want to share on this subject is truth that I have lived and applied through certain very difficult times. Certainly, my difficult times are not numerous. I must say I have received many mercies inexplicably and very few afflictions.

But what afflictions I've had have not been light, have not been relatively light. They've been fairly heavy. And that being so, I have had opportunity, just as you have, to be in the laboratory with these concepts that we'll be talking about from scripture.

And I have found them to be true. And those who were with me and knew me at the times that I was going through affliction saw that they were true. The word of God is true.

And I'm not going to speak of theory here merely. Affliction can be good for you. Now, let me just say this.

Suffering is, at a certain level, suffering is bad. In this respect, it is my opinion, and I know there are many here who have a different opinion about this, that it is my opinion that God did not desire for man to sin. Now, I realize that those who have a different angle on the sovereignty of God than I do will say that God did ordain that man should sin.

And you're free to have a disagreement. But I'm going to start with that. I don't agree that God wanted man to sin.

I believe it was against the will of God for man to sin. I don't think that God doesn't want you to do something, or that he does want you to do something and he commands you not to do it. God doesn't play games with our minds.

If he doesn't want you to do it, he tells you not to do it. If he wants you to do it, he tells you to do it. He told Adam and Eve not to do it.

And if God's word can, in any sense, convey to us his will, then he didn't want them to do it. Now, that being so, the suffering that is coming to the world because of this sin is not really part of what God would prefer. And we know this is true also because when Jesus comes back and sets things right again, there won't be any suffering.

There will be no crying, no tears, no sorrow, no pain, no disappointment. You see, when Jesus comes and establishes things the way they ought to be, there won't be any suffering. That being so, and by the way, there was no suffering before man sinned.

We could say that in a perfect world, where all is done in such a way as pleases and glorifies God, there would be no suffering. But we need to give this caveat. We don't live in that world.

We don't live in a perfect world. We live in a world that has sin in its history and in its present and, I dare say, in its future yet. And therefore, that changes things.

The need for suffering has to be viewed through the issue of the reality of sin. If a man would come up to you with a sharp knife, razor sharp, and he says, what I intend to do is

just slit your stomach right open like that and take stuff out of you. Would that be good or bad for him to do that? Depends if he's a surgeon or a mugger, doesn't it? If you're perfectly healthy and someone says, I'm going to cut you open and take stuff out of you, and at great pain to you, that is not good.

That's criminal. But if you are sick, if you are disordered, if by cutting you open and taking bad stuff out of you is the way to save your life and to restore you to health, then is that good or bad? It might be equally painful if you I mean, not nowadays, but through much of history, when people had arms amputated because they were gangrenous or whatever, they didn't have any anesthesia. You know, I mean, I mean, for the sake of this illustration, put yourself back 200 years and you've got gangrene in your leg and they've got to take it off.

And all they've got is an old rusty saw. Is that suffering? I think that'd be suffering. Is it good or bad? Well, at the moment, it doesn't seem very good, but you know it is.

But it wouldn't be good if you weren't disordered, if you weren't sick. In an unfallen world, suffering would have no legitimate place. In a fallen, sick, diseased, disordered world, suffering has a function, just as surgery does in a disordered body.

And the Scripture teaches that. The psalmist said, it's good for me that I've been afflicted so I might learn your statutes. Now, if I hadn't been a sinner, if I automatically walked in your statutes from the day one, and if everyone else did, well, I wouldn't have had to go through the affliction.

But I learned something through it and I needed to learn that. Is suffering good or bad? Well, it can be good. 1 Peter 3.17 says, For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

Is it good to suffer for doing good? Well, it's better to suffer for doing good than it is to suffer for doing evil, if you suffer in the will of God. You see, for someone to say, an all-loving, all-powerful God would never allow suffering, that person presupposes that suffering can't be a good thing. Which is the only reason a good God couldn't allow it.

But what if it is a good thing? What if it is at least potentially good? Then there's no problem believing in an all-loving and all-powerful God who allows suffering. He intends it for good. It is your reaction to it that will determine, in many respects, whether you benefit from it or not.

But there are benefits that you can derive through suffering that you cannot derive without them in your fallen state. We will identify and list some of them and show you the scriptures for them in a moment. In Hebrews 12, verses 10 and 11, the writer says, For they, meaning our fathers, indeed for a few days chastened us, as seemed best to them.



But he, that is God, does it for our profit that we may be partakers of his holiness. In other words, we're chastened so that we become more holy. You know, sanctified, character-shaping.

Now he says, Now no chastening seems joyful for the present, but painful. By definition. Anyone ever heard of suffering that wasn't painful? I mean, to say that suffering is painful is simply to state the obvious.

I mean, if it's not painful, you don't call it suffering. So, no suffering, no chastening at the time seems joyful. It always seems painful.

But what they say afterward, it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Do we need to be trained? Do we need to have the fruit of righteousness produced in us? Do we have that naturally? No, we don't. We're not born trained.

We're not born fruitful in a righteous sense. That has to be worked in. That has to be trained in.

And so, the chastening we receive, of course it's painful. Of course it's not joyous. You couldn't call it chastening if it was.

But afterward, it yields fruit that is greatly desirable to anyone who hungers and thirsts for righteousness. It is the peaceable fruit of righteousness. You hunger for that fruit.

And you'll be glad you get chastened. You won't enjoy it. That's what he's saying.

You don't enjoy it when it's happening. No one enjoys hurting, unless they're kind of mentally deranged. But you can nonetheless embrace it as a good thing, knowing that it can work in you something of great value.

In Romans 8, 28, which I'm sure all of you can quote, Paul says, We know that all things work together for good to those that love God and who are called according to His purpose. If you love God, if you're called according to His purpose, all things work together for your good. Is suffering good? Not in itself, maybe.

But if it works good in your life, then it is eminently justifiable for God to allow you to have it for your good. By the way, I did mention that suffering at a certain level is generally bad. Because in an unfallen world, it would be unnecessary.

It's a contingency plan because of the fall and sin. Also, we should point out that most suffering, or at least a great deal of suffering, comes about as a result of sins of other people. Violent criminals would come to mind immediately as persons who cause suffering.

And if you endure suffering from such a cause, you could easily say, This suffering is not

good. This is the result of someone doing something very evil. Well, really, all suffering is the result of somebody doing something very evil.

Namely, Adam and Eve. But although people do things evil, God can mean it for good. That's what Joseph said to his brothers, isn't it? They sold him to slavery.

That wasn't good. Did he enjoy it? I doubt it. Spent 12 years alternately as slave or in prison.

In a third world jail. And after it was all over, he said to his brothers, You intended evil against me, but God meant it for good. So, even that which comes upon you by sins of others.

Yes, it is wrong for them to do what they do. But it doesn't mean it's wrong for you to experience it. Or that it can't potentially be very beneficial to you to experience it.

Everything that came on Jesus came because of the sins of men. Are you glad they happened to him? Are you glad he died? Are you glad Judas betrayed him? Are you glad the Sanhedrin was unjust? Are you glad Pilate was a wimp? Are you glad that these people did all these horrible things? Well, at one level, no. Love does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth.

But at another level, we can say, but God meant it for good. And God doesn't have to do any fancy footwork to justify himself in bringing such sufferings on his son. The result is so clearly good for us all.

And for Jesus, too. He learned obedience through things he suffered. He was made perfect through suffering, the Bible says.

We'll talk about that later. But the point is, to say that suffering is bad is not to say at all. There is a bad side of it.

But from God's perspective, at least from a godly person's perspective, it is not altogether a bad thing. It is something which in the hand of God, though it's painful, it can bring forth good fruit, which is very desirable. Now, I've listed here some of the ways that Christians can suffer.

Now, it might seem to be unnecessary to make a list like this. The only reason I do is because there are a number of people out there who have a certain theology that says that Christians really aren't supposed to suffer much. They sometimes allow that Christians can suffer persecution, but they say you're not supposed to ever be sick.

You're not supposed to ever be poor. You're not supposed to ever have bad things happen to you. And they say that if anything like that happens, that's the devil ripping you off.

That's not God. That's the devil. And you're supposed to rise up and take authority over the devil.

And you're supposed to not let him get away with that kind of stuff. And you're supposed to be in charge of his situation. If you know how to exercise your faith and so forth and so on, then you'll always be healthy and wealthy and wise.

This theology is simply not agreeable with Scripture. And therefore, I feel compelled at least briefly to list some of the things that the Bible itself says that Christians must sometimes suffer, can suffer, in the will of God. One of them is poverty.

Many Scriptures can be brought forward to point this out. We only need one to prove the point. In 1 Corinthians 4.11, Paul speaks about his own experience.

Certainly, he was a man of faith and power. He walked in the spirit and spiritual victory. He's the one who said we are more than conquerors through him that love this.

He's more than conqueror, but he didn't keep from being poor. Paul described his own state in 1 Corinthians 4.11. He says, to this present hour, we both hunger and thirst and are poorly clothed. We're beaten and homeless.

Well, you can't get much poorer than that. You're poorly clothed, you don't have food, and you don't have a home. Of course, he carried around a big money bag full of gold, right? He just never spent any of it.

No, he was poor. Now, there were times when Paul carried money, but it wasn't his. The churches in the Gentile lands sometimes took collections, and Paul, supervised at his own suggestion by men from the giving churches, would carry the money to Jerusalem.

Sometimes a great sum was carried by Paul, but that wasn't his. He was personally poor. And so, obviously, Christians can be poor, even faithful and godly and spiritual Christians.

Victorious Christians can be poor. Sickness is another thing. And again, I could multiply scriptures on this point.

And in a tape series I have called Examining the Word of Faith, I have two whole tapes examining the scriptures about the subject of sickness and poverty in the life of a Christian. But in 2 Timothy 4.20, Paul said, Erastus, one of his companions, stayed at Corinth, but Trophimus I have left sick in Miletus. Now, Paul is a guy who knew how to heal.

That's not really correct. He doesn't know how to heal. God healed people through him from time to time.

Even raised the dead. He also knew how to strike people blind occasionally. I mean, he

was a man who had some power of healing operating through him.

In one place in Ephesus it says in Acts 19.11-12, that special miracles were done through the hands of Paul, so even his handkerchiefs and his aprons, when delivered to the people who were sick or demon-possessed, caused them to be healed or delivered from demons on the occasion they received his hanky. Now, certainly Paul had some hankies around in Miletus when Trophimus was sick there. But they weren't working.

Because there's no magic in the miracles of God. There's sovereignty. God is sovereign.

He hasn't given us magic formulas for getting his power to work for us. This is where the Word of Faith doctrine and some other Christian thinking is way off base. It makes man sovereign and God the slave.

Christianity is the opposite. In Christianity you're not even saved unless God is your sovereign and you're the slave, you're the servant. And that means God will heal when he wants to heal in whatever way he chooses.

And he will not heal when he doesn't choose. And that's got to be okay with us, because he's God, we're not. And Paul, who had seen many miraculous healings through his own ministry, his own pal Trophimus, he couldn't get him well.

He had to leave. He left him sick. His dear companion Timothy had stomach problems, frequent infirmities in his stomach.

Did Paul say, claim your healing, brother? No, he said, take a little wine. Don't drink only water. Take a little wine for your stomach's sake for your often infirmities.

Paul himself had some infirmities. And we don't even have to turn to that controversial and ambiguous passage about the thorn in the flesh to prove it. In Galatians, Paul said that when he came to Galatia, he came in much infirmity and weakness.

And so sickness, as well as poverty, happened to Christians. And there doesn't need to be any explanation of what's deficient about this. There's nothing deficient about it.

It's just normal. Suffering is normal. We don't have to adopt a theology that makes us feel good about not having to suffer and then have all these troubles explaining why we still are suffering.

It's normal to suffer. It can be good for us to suffer. Bereavement, that is the loss of loved ones.

Christians suffer that all the time. Paul almost did in the case of his friend Erastus. He mentions him in Philippians 2, 27.

He says, For indeed he was sick almost unto death, that God had mercy on him, and not

only on him, but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. On that occasion, Paul escaped bereavement, but not forever. Many of Paul's friends died.

And bereavement, the great pain of losing a loved one, sometimes that's the greatest suffering of all for a period of time. Christians go through that. You know, it's a funny thing how Christians who live a generally charmed life in this part of the world, very little suffering, very little poverty, very little pain.

When someone close to us dies, if our child dies, if our spouse dies, Christians, the first thing they think, Why God? Why? Why'd you do this to me? As if God has to come up with some kind of explanation. Don't they know people die all over the world every day? Don't they know that those people who die have loved ones who wish they hadn't? Why should you be so special that your loved ones don't die? They're all going to die. You're going to die.

God doesn't have to explain himself. Death is a reality. And because it's a reality, you don't have to say, God, why did this person die? I had a wife who was killed in an accident at age 27.

We'd been married six months. I never asked God why. I asked other questions.

I asked why God had allowed me to be married for six months. But to me, asking God why, it's not wrong to ask him for information. If you think, OK, God, you're doing something here, I'd like to know what it is so I can cooperate.

That's one thing. But to say, God, explain yourself is simply beyond our province. We're not called upon to take God to task about things.

And he doesn't owe us any explanations. He's a loving God. He deals with us through suffering in a world that requires suffering in order to bring about some of his purposes in our life, as we shall see as we progress through this study.

Heartbreak certainly is a very common thing. It's a kind of suffering. In 2 Corinthians 11, 28 and 29, Paul talks about the sufferings he goes through in addition to the external sufferings which he catalogs for us there.

He says, besides the other things, what comes upon me daily, my deep concern for all the churches, who is weak and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble and I do not burn? He burns inside. His heart breaks inside when he hears of Christians stumbling. Paul knew what heartbreak was.

Christians generally do. What about physical disabling? Handicaps? Yeah, it happens to Christians too. Paul said in Galatians 4, 13, You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first.

How about rejection? I don't know very many kinds of suffering that are more severe than rejection. Which is kind of a strange thing, really. I mean, why should rejection in itself be hurtful? It's not like any of your tissue gets torn.

It's not like your nerves experience irritation, like, I mean, suffering, physical suffering. Why should rejection matter so much? I'm not here to explore that question with you, but I would say this, everyone knows it does. Some people would rather experience physical sickness than rejection from people, especially from certain people.

However, rejection is a common thing for Christians to experience. Paul experienced that too. He's a good example of most of these things.

In 2 Timothy 4, verse 10, Paul said, For Demas, again, one of his ministry companions earlier on, Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world. That's got to hurt. In verse 16 of the same chapter, he said, At my first defense, that means when he stood before Nero, no one stood with me, but they all forsook me.

All his friends forsook him. When? Oh, just when he was on trial for his life, that's all. Who needs any support at a time like that? All his friends rejected him.

Actually, he also wrote and said to Timothy, that all those in Asia have forsaken me. That guy knew rejection, but he was always rejoicing. He didn't think God was somehow unfair to allow these things to happen.

Now, I think I got my pages in the wrong order here. No, we don't. Here we go.

A couple of other kinds of suffering that Christians go through. This one you might not hear as much about. That's dry spells.

Spiritual dry spells. If you get converted and you're all excited about Jesus, and you're sensing a newness of life for a period of time, and then you go through a period where you don't feel any of that, God feels far away. You sing the same songs, but they don't do anything for you.

You remember how they used to tingle when you sang them at first, now you sing them and it's just kind of going through the motions. Those scriptures that used to thrill you, you read the same scriptures and they don't do anything for you. You're just dry.

You're going through a tunnel. Well, there are such dry spells. They do not prove that you're doing anything wrong.

It's just another form of suffering that Christians must endure. In Isaiah chapter 50 and verse 10, God says, Who among you fears the Lord, who obeys the voice of his servant, who walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely upon his God. There's times when you feel like the light is out spiritually.

You feel like it's all gone dark and you don't know why. You can't find any sin in your life to blame it on. Well, you're just going through a tunnel.

You're on the path. The path has tunnels on it. You go into a tunnel, it's dark, it's cold, it's damp.

It doesn't feel good. But it's not a cave, it's a tunnel. There's light at the other end and if you keep progressing, keep trusting God, eventually you come out of it.

There'll be another one down the road. You'll go through them from time to time. Some of them are quite long.

I think I've been through some that took years to get through. It ain't any fun. But I've suffered so little generally in my life, it seems to me, nothing to complain about it.

But the biggest thing that makes that a trouble to you is that you fear that you have lost God somewhere. You feel like you made a wrong turn somewhere and God is not there anymore. And that can be scary.

That can hurt. But really, those who are in such conditions, when you go through a tunnel, and you go through a tunnel, you would never, in your own mind, be able to separate whether you're believing because it feels true or because you simply believe God's veracity, you believe God's telling the truth. Those spells are necessary training periods.

Another kind of suffering that some people, Christians, go through, and they're singled out for special instruction in 1 Peter 3, are unequally yoked spouses. Generally, this is harder for the wife, if she's the Christian and her husband's not, for the simple reason that she's under his headship and leadership. It makes it much harder for her if he's not a Christian than it is, say, if the husband's a Christian and the wife's not.

But it's always... I mean, if you're married to someone and you're a Christian and they're not a Christian, that's not easy. It's particularly hard when it comes to raising the children and how you're going to educate them, what you're going to let them be exposed to if there's not concord there between you and your spouse. It doesn't matter whether you're the husband or the wife.

It's hard. It's painful. It's a special kind of suffering that those who don't go through it probably cannot relate with very well.

But there is such suffering for Christians. Sometimes it's one of the ways in which God allows us to suffer. Peter said in 1 Peter 3, Likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some don't obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives.

So, Christian wives suffering in an unequally yoked situation nonetheless are called to be faithful and to act obediently to God in that situation. Of course, very few people would deny that there's another form of suffering that the Church has gone through since its beginning, and that's persecution, which includes things like imprisonment and torture and even martyrdom. We have examples of that throughout Scripture and throughout Church history.

In Hebrews 11, 35-37, it talks about certain faithful ones in the Old Testament. It says, Others endured torture, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, that's floggings with whips.

Yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned. They were sawn in two.

They were tempted. They were slain with a sword. Some of that sounds very undesirable.

Sawn in two particularly gives me the creeps. But there are Christians, there are believers at least, believers in the Old Testament, who endured that. The reference is apparently to Isaiah.

The Bible doesn't say that Isaiah died this way, but Jewish tradition has long said that that's how he died. And so the writer of Hebrews seems to take that as a true case, that Isaiah died this way and was sawn in two. I haven't known many others who were, but that only takes one to show that that can happen.

Christians can suffer greatly. And as we speak here tonight and are sitting a little bit uncomfortable because the room is so hot, there are Christians who are a lot uncomfortable sitting in rooms a lot hotter than this, but there's no water, there's no windows, there's no air circulating. They've got a bucket in the corner and their own dung and their own urine is there providing atmosphere for them.

There's rats running along the walls, cockroaches in their food. And this is their lot day in and day out. Some of them have been in that case for decades.

And they're there right now. There are Christians in some parts of the world right now who live in villages which are subject to periodic raids from neighboring villages where the raiders come in and hack up the men with machetes, rape the women, burn down the houses, take the children off and sell them into slavery. That ain't any fun.

And we're not talking about the Middle Ages. We're talking about right now in the Sudan and many places in the world. There are Christians facing these things.

You think you're uncomfortable? You think you've suffered? I doubt if you've suffered compared to that. Now, I don't want to belittle the suffering you have gone through



because, you know, the grace of God is sufficient. And if you suffer greatly faithfully, you receive great grace.

If you only suffer a little, you receive proportionate grace, not as much grace. Actually, I suspect that it can be as hard for us going through small sufferings with small grace as it is for people to go through immense sufferings with immense grace. I mean, it's the grace that kind of evens things out.

But still, I would have to say that somewhat theoretically because I have never been through what most of these people have gone through. I will say, though, that those things can happen to Christians and there's not anything wrong with that happening. That's good for us at times.

2 Timothy 3.12, Paul says, Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. So, persecution, sickness, poverty, rejection, bereavement, dry spells spiritually, I mean, all kinds of things. Many discomforts, disabilities.

Those things are all normative. Those are all normal. And that's important for us to know because one of the hardest ways to benefit from suffering is when we think it isn't supposed to be happening.

We think it just isn't normal. We wonder if this means God has abandoned us or maybe we're sinning. I mean, it just throws you into confusion if you don't understand what the Bible teaches about solution.

That makes it so hard to really get a hold of it and gain anything from it. So, the first thing we need to know is it's pretty normal. Now, the Scripture indicates that God is doing something in our lives here.

And we've been talking in the last sessions about what that is. He's cultivating the character of Jesus Christ in us. This is actually grooming us to reign with Him.

Someone told me once that they were privy... I think it was a missionary in Japan, if I'm not mistaken, but it might have been someone else. They were privy to the process that was used, I believe in Japan, to train and condition the emperor's heir, the one who would become the emperor next. And I'm afraid it was so long ago I don't remember the details, but I remember hearing at the time how carefully this emperor-to-be was given the best education, protected from every kind of bad influence and so forth, and just coddled and trained.

And every effort was made to see that that heir, when he was old, would be a fit occupant of the throne. And I'm sure that similar things happen in every monarchy. I just don't hear about the specifics.

But there is one monarchy called the Kingdom of God, of which it is said that we are

God's sons, and if sons, heirs. Heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ Jesus. And as heirs, we will reign with Him.

It says in 2 Timothy 2.12, if we endure, we shall also reign with Him. That is what God has in mind, is that we will reign with Him. And you know, reigning is a powerful position to be in.

You don't want to put everybody in that position. You want some... I mean, check it out. Who's in the highest office in this country? Is it a good situation? No, because we have people in high office who have no character.

A machine gun maybe is a good thing in a certain place, but it's not a good thing in the hands of an idiot child. He doesn't have self-control. And when I say idiot, I don't use the term literally of a child who literally has the IQ of an idiot.

I'm talking about a child who simply doesn't have any wisdom or sense or character. Or an adult, for that matter, in that condition. You don't want to put that much power in the hands of a person who has no character.

God has in mind for us to rule with Him, to rule the universe. We're going to judge angels, Paul said. We're going to judge the world.

Hey, well, are you qualified? Well, He's working on that. He's qualifying you. He's training you.

Suffering actually is nothing less in the hand of God in the life of the Christian than God's training of the royal seed. Training with Him. He's got to change us before He can trust us with so much power and authority, I believe.

It is a sign that we are His children when we suffer His chastisement. It is a sign of His care for us. Probably no verses of Scripture make this more clear than Hebrews 12, 6-11, which say, For whom the Lord loves, He chastens and scourges every son whom He receives.

If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons. For what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us and we paid them respect.

Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He does it for our profit that we may be partakers of His holiness. We've read these verses before. Now, chastening seems joyful at the present but painful.

Nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have

been trained by it. Therefore, strengthen the hands that hang down. And I would be encouraged.

Jesus said in Revelation 3, 19, As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. When you suffer, it is not a sign of God's anger necessarily. It is not a sign of His rejection.

He chastens every son that He receives, not every son that He rejects. The sons He cares about. And, you know, sons, generic, children.

Sons and daughters. Those that He receives, those that He accepts, He trains. He doesn't leave them without training.

In fact, the word chastening, we usually think of it strictly in terms of inflicting painful discipline. But the Greek word for chastening simply means to bring up a child. It's just the word that means to bring up a child to maturity.

It involves painful forms of discipline at times, which is why He says, No chastening seems joyous, but painful. He is talking about that painful side. Painful to the child of being brought up to maturity.

But that's what God is up to. And that's what's happening. Now, this discipline in our lives is essential.

When God found you, when you were converted and became a Christian out of the world, you were like a raw stone dug out of a quarry. And He's got designs on you. He intends for you to be a smooth living stone to be assembled into a holy temple in the Lord.

But that takes some work. Now, that work means that there's going to have to be some going against the grain. There's going to have to be some self-limiting.

You see, if you have any complaints about your own character, the things that you probably have complaints about are things that you do that at one level you strongly want to do. I mean, there are things you have drives and temptations to do. But there's a place where you don't want to do them either.

Like Paul said in Romans 7, I do what I don't want to do, and what I say I'm going to do, I don't do that. And he says, I don't understand that. Well, I don't know if any of us really understands that.

But the point is, there's a certain level at which we want to be holy, but there's another part of us, as Paul said, there's another law of my members that brings me in a bondage to sin. It's those desires that need to be curtailed. Or as Paul put it, you need to, through the Spirit, mortify or put to death the deeds of the body.

Now, not all the deeds of the body. He's talking about the sinful deeds of the body. And

what it means is that you need to curtail your own behavior in accord with what God has laid out for you to be and to do.

And that means discipline. Now, God disciplines us, but we also discipline ourselves. You know, when a baby is born, it does not know how to discipline itself.

It can't even discipline its own bowels or bladder. It can't make wise decisions about what it should put in its mouth. The baby has no internal controls at all.

As it grows older, though, as it has no internal controls, the parents have to impose controls. But as the baby grows to more maturity and more wisdom, the child begins to have more internal controls. The child automatically doesn't eat decon.

You know, when he gets smart enough to know that, it may look good, but that's not good for me. I'm not going to eat that. The child learns not to put his hand in a fire.

Maybe he learns the hard way, but he learns. And he then has controls that are internal. He controls himself.

Until he has those internal controls, well, he needs external controls. And we're no different than that. If we're going to be controlled, if we're going to curtail certain behavior, we need the external control that God gives us until we grow to the point where we have the internal controls.

Now, both are called for. The Bible speaks of God using corrective discipline on us to impose external controls on our behavior. You know, Psalm 23, 4, where David said, Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will do no evil for you are with me.

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. It's very comforting to know God has a rod and a staff. What does he do with that rod and staff? He curtails sheep's behavior, for one thing.

He also defends them from enemies. But that shepherd's staff, that hook, is to forcibly prevent a sheep that wants to go the wrong way from doing so. And the sheep wants to go that way, but the shepherd says, No, this is the way you're going.

And he forcibly controls that sheep's behavior with that staff. The rod, which is really used primarily, I think, to beat off wolves and bears and animals like that, that come after sheep. Also, from what I've heard, I can't verify this from experience, but I've heard that it was sometimes used to break a sheep's leg if he wandered too frequently.

Then, of course, the shepherd had to carry the sheep. But the point is, the rod could be an agent of pain to the sheep, but only for its good, so it doesn't wander off to its own death. The rod and the staff are means by which God imposes His controls and His

discipline on our lives.

David said, It's comforting to me that you have a rod and a staff. Do you like external controls in your life? Probably not all the time. But it's comforting to know that God will not just let us go off without interfering.

Jeremiah 10, verses 23 and 24, the prophet says, O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself. It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps. O Lord, correct me, but with justice, not in Your anger, lest You bring me to nothing.

Jeremiah is a godly man. He says, God, I know that I don't have the wisdom to do what's right. I'm going to go off in the wrong way.

It's not in man who walks to direct his own steps. So, God, correct me. That's a prayer in the will of God.

God will correct you. God is committed to you. In 1 Corinthians 11, we read of God's correction, rather severe correction, on a church that was defiling the Lord's table and eating unworthily of the body and the blood of Jesus, as Paul put it.

And he says this in 1 Corinthians 11, 29-32. He says, For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason, many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep.

Now, wait a minute. Many in the church were weak. Many were sick, and some had died.

That's what he means by sleep. Members of the church had died, and some were sick. Why? It was no accident.

It's because of what you do unworthily with the Lord's body, he said. He that eats unworthily eats judgment to himself. And for this reason, many of you are weak and sick, and some have died.

But then Paul goes on and talks about self-correction, self-judgment. He says this in 1 Corinthians 11, 29-32. He says this in verse 31 and 32, actually.

He says, For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. Now, what he's referring to there is some people in the church have died. Some are sick.

Because what? Because they're not judging themselves. They're not controlling their own behavior. They're not saying, Hey, we're doing the wrong thing here, and then changing.

That's self-discipline. And if you don't discipline yourself, you've got to be disciplined by your dad, by God. And he says, If we would just judge ourselves, we wouldn't have to be judged like this.

But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world. Interesting. Paul speaks as if it is possible that Christians could be condemned with the world, if not for God's intervention in chastening.

If we don't chasten ourselves, if we don't discipline ourselves, God will chasten us. Because he doesn't want us to be condemned with the world. He wants us to change.

Now, in addition to self-correction, self-imposed discipline, and that which God brings upon us, there is also suffering for righteousness' sake. This is no doubt what Jesus had in mind when he told his disciples that they should take up a cross. A cross was an instrument of condemnation, an instrument of painful death, execution.

A man who had a cross was rejected by society. For the disciples to take up and bear a cross means they have to accept rejection for their faith, for the stand they take. Christians not only suffer chastisement from God when we go the wrong way, we experience chastisement of another sort from the world when we go the right way.

We can't win. If winning means avoiding suffering, we can't win. You do what's wrong, and God will chasten you.

You do what's right, the world will hate you. And if you just be neutral, you're still going to suffer in another way. But there is that suffering that Christians accept by taking up the cross of Christ, by saying, I will do what God wants, it may make me exceedingly unpopular, but that's not the issue here.

Being popular isn't what God has me here for. Being obedient is. And in Luke 9, 23, Jesus said to them, If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

In Hebrews 11, speaking of Moses and his faith, in verses 24 through 26, it says, For by faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt. For he looked to the reward. Moses made a decision.

He chose to suffer affliction. Is that masochistic? No, it's not masochistic, it's just wisdom. If the choice is this, enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season, and the accolades and the approval of the sinful world, and then go to hell, or endure the suffering of affliction with the people of God, it's simply wisdom to choose to suffer for righteousness sake, as Moses did.

In 1 Peter, chapter 4, verses 1 through 4, Peter said, Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind. For he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but for the will of God. For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in

doing the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries.

In regard to these, they think it's strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you. Now, what does he mean where he says there, For he that has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin. I used to think that he meant that suffering results in ceasing from sin.

Like when God disciplines you for sinning, you don't do it again. However, it simply isn't the case that everyone who has suffered has ceased from sin. Even Christians who have suffered haven't always ceased from sin.

And then I consider maybe it's talking about Jesus. He suffered. He that suffered has ceased from sin.

But Jesus didn't cease from sin. He never sinned. You have to sin before you can cease from it.

But I understand in the context now what he's saying is this. You suffer because you have ceased from sin. Your friends with whom you used to sin don't understand why you're not running with them anymore.

And they speak evil of you. They throw things at you. They reject you.

They persecute you. Why? Because you're not running in sin with them. You've given up your life of sin, and therefore you suffer.

The one who's suffering for Christ's sake is suffering because he has ceased from sin. And is no longer living the time of his life to please the Gentiles. And they're not pleased.

Therefore, they speak evil. So this is bearing the cross. This is the kind of suffering that Christians must embrace and be prepared to shoulder all through our lives, possibly.

We experience very little of it here, but that may change. Now, in addition to suffering the chastening that comes from the Lord in the sense of him correcting us when we're going the wrong way. And in addition to suffering the persecution and the cross that comes from the world when we're doing what's right.

There's another category of suffering that people face. Christians and non-Christians. This is just that seemingly meaningless, that seemingly causeless suffering.

A tornado comes through and wipes out a few houses. It doesn't seem to make sense which houses were selected for destruction. The house of an atheist and the house of the pastor got taken out.

Go figure. Why did God allow the pastor's house to be taken out and the atheist's house

to be taken out? Is this a judgment or a blessing or what? Well, in a sense, it's not necessarily either. I believe in the sovereignty of God, but I don't believe that everything that happens is directly dictated by God.

I believe God dictates what he wants and what he dictates. No one can thwart his purpose. No one can stay his hand.

But that Bible doesn't say anywhere that he dictates everything that happens. We live in a disordered world and in a disordered world, nature is not with us. Before the fall, gardening was wonderful for Adam and Eve.

After the fall, they had to do the same thing, produce their food. But in the sweat of their face, thorns and thistles were to be encountered. Why? Because nature is no longer on their side.

A disordered nature makes life hard for people. There's weather patterns that are destructive. There's tsunamis, volcanoes, earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, or shipwrecks.

These things are suffering that all people endure, Christian and non-Christian. Now, I'm not saying that Christians endure them exactly the same way as non-Christians do or that they even have the same reason for going through it as non-Christians do. In the hand of God, even these kinds of suffering can be part of what God intends to do in your life.

But it should not be thought that God is here punishing you because you did wrong or the devil is punishing you because you did right. It's just that your house was in the path of the hurricane. Now, some people might think that's too low a view of the sovereignty of God.

I want to make you aware that I have a very high view of the sovereignty of God. I don't believe a sparrow falls to the ground but by the will of your father. That's a high view of the sovereignty of God.

I believe that even those natural disasters that took out Job's family and his home and his livestock, those were brought by God's permission. God was not absent. When we suffer, even when it's not chastening, even when it's not persecution, even when it's just plain suffering that all our neighbors suffer the same thing and they're not even saved, that doesn't mean God's not in it.

Because even if God didn't directly send it or He doesn't have a particular reason to want to take you out, you know that God could prevent it. And therefore, we know that whatever happens to us could at least have been prevented by God had He chosen to prevent it. And we know that God wasn't taking care of business on some other end of the universe while this thing was happening to us and He didn't know about it.



The hairs of your head are numbered. He knows every detail of your life. He knows what hits you.

And He knows how to stop it. You know, the Bible says, The angel of the Lord encamps around about them that fear Him and delivers them. Well, where was the angel that day when the house got demolished and the children were carried up in the hurricane or in the tornado and were found in the trees cut in half? Where was God then? Where was the angel of the Lord encamped around the righteous on that day? They were on duty.

God doesn't have to explain when He chooses to allow the hedge to be removed for the moment. He never explained it to Job. And that's the irony because you've got 40 chapters of the book of Job where the question is being asked, Why did God do this? Why is God doing this? Why is God doing this? Finally, God answers and says, God doesn't owe you any answers.

But one thing is for sure, nothing happens that He doesn't at least permit. His angels are able to deliver. And if they didn't deliver this time, it's because God said, Step aside.

I'm opening the hedge here. I've got a purpose in this. I've got something I'm doing.

I'm testing this guy. I'm going to show this man off. You know, it's a wonderful thing to think about it.

I mean, whether you have a loved one who was killed in an accident, it was not persecution. It was maybe not the chastening of the Lord for something you did wrong. It just seems meaningless, senseless.

A senseless accident. And they died. Yet, certainly Job must have felt that about his losses.

A wind came, blew down the house, killed all his kids. Marauding Arabs came through, took all his livestock, killed all his servants. Then he gets sick on top of that.

An annoying, aggravating boils all over his body. Certainly that just seemed like a streak of bad luck. But you know what was happening? God had a bet on him.

Job didn't know it. But God had a bet on Job. The devil said, I'll bet he'll curse you to his face.

God said, I'll bet he won't. The devil said, try it. Move that hedge.

We'll see. God says, you're on. Why did Job suffer? Job never knew.

I'm not sure I know. I don't think any of us really know for sure. But one thing we do know is God had a bet on him.

The devil said, this man will suffer. He'll curse you like other men do. God said, I don't think he will.

And when things happen to you, your reaction to those sufferings, if there's no other reason in the world that explains why this particular thing happened to you at this particular time, there's at least this much. God's got a bet on you. God's showcasing your faith to the principalities and powers and the demons and the devil who's trying so desperately to cause you to doubt God and to curse God.

The fact that God allows this to happen means he's got a certain amount of confidence that you can pull it off with his help. He's showing you off. And that should be, in a sense, pleasing.

It's expensive to us to be showed off that way. But we don't own ourselves, so it doesn't cost us anything at all. It's God.

It costs precious in the sight of the Lord. Precious means expensive. Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.

It costs God something. Does it cost you anything to lose your life? No. You don't own yourself anyway.

You're not your own, you're bought with a price. You can't lose what you don't own. You lose your life and you haven't lost anything.

You're not the poor because you never owned you. But God did. Expensive to the Lord is the death of his saints.

Precious. Now, if God wants to do whatever he wants to do at my expense for his glory, that is his business. One thing I know, though, even if he were a capricious God, and thank God he is not, and I've thought about this many times, what if he was? Who could tell him he has to be some other way? God is, by definition, the one who answers to none.

He is who he is and no one has any right to complain to him and no one can change him. What if God was less like he is and more like these little boys who like to tear the wings off of flies just to see them handicapped? Or like these guys I knew in junior high who like to take kitty cats' heads and put them in vices or throw them out of a car on the freeway at 60 miles an hour? What if God was that kind of a person? There are people like that. What if God was like that? He'd just torture us for the fun of it.

Well, what could we do? Nothing. We'd just have to grin and bear it, wouldn't we? But the wonderful thing is God isn't that kind of God. And if He was, we would just have to say, Hey, I've got nothing to say about it.

I'm the thing made. He's the one who made it. The thing made can't say to Him who made it, Why have you made me thus? If God happened to be a cruel and vicious and capricious God and just took pleasure in making our lives miserable and had no good in it for us at all, what could we say? We have no right to complain.

We don't own ourselves. He owns us. He could do that with His stuff.

Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with my own things? Jesus had a man say in the parable who represented God. But you know, we have this. Not only do we not have the right to complain to God, since He owns us and can do what He likes, but we have something He doesn't owe us at all, and that is His goodwill, His love, His acceptance, His guarantee that not one thing is ever to be wasted.

It can all work for your good. It may not automatically, but it can. And we're going to talk real quickly here about how that happens.

Well, there's one other Scripture about sufferings that come which are not particularly a judgment for sin or anything like that. In John 9, 1-3, it says, Jesus passed by and He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? They just figured, you know, maybe he's suffering because of some sin he or his parents committed.

Jesus answered, neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him. His sufferings were not explicable in terms of some punishment from God, nor in terms of some persecution from the enemy. It was simply an opportunity that God could be glorified in this situation.

And by the way, He was. Jesus healed him in that case, and that was what glorified God. Now, let me give you... I've given you a list of the kinds of sufferings you might have to endure.

Let me give you a list of things you can benefit from it. How your character can benefit. I'd love to give a whole sermon about each of these.

In fact, this message tonight is sort of like a condensed version of a four-tape set we call, Making Sense Out of Suffering. I've put a little different angle on it here, because it's part of our character set. But all of these points I'm going into, I go into in much more detail in six hours of teaching.

It may seem like we've gone six hours tonight, but we haven't, and we won't. But there is six hours of teaching on tape, if you want to go into this more, called Making Sense of Suffering. It's a set of four tapes.

What benefits are there to be had from suffering for the Christian? Well, many. Much every way. We've already seen several times, Hebrews 12, 11 says that chasing what it

is afterward, it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness in those who are exercised by it.

So how is this, what is this fruit of righteousness? Well, among other things, let me give you some. Endurance. Endurance is a character trait.

It says in Proverbs, if you faint in times of adversity, your strength is weak. That's not good character. That's wimpy character.

You need to be made strong. God needs champions. God needs heroes in this world.

It's a war that's going on here, and He doesn't want any wimps. That's why when people were wimps, He chased them off. They said, Lord, I'll follow you wherever you want.

He says, listen, foxes have holes, birds have nests. I don't know where to sleep. You want to go with me? You sure? Someone said, I'll follow you, Lord.

Let me first say goodbye to those in my house. No, if you put your hand to the plow and look back, you're not worthy. You can't come.

Jesus didn't want half-hearted wimps. He wanted the stubborn ones who would say, no turning back. To whom should we go? You alone have the words of eternal life.

To endure is a character trait. To develop endurance requires resistance. You don't build up stamina physically.

If you want to be a marathon runner, you don't build up stamina without training to the point of extreme discomfort. But it's that training beyond the comfort level that increases your stamina and your endurance. The Bible indicates that endurance is produced through suffering.

Paul said in Romans 5, 3, And not only that, but we glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance. James said the same thing. James 1, 3, Knowing that the testing of your faith, that means trials, produces patience.

Again, the word is perseverance or endurance. I'm not sure why it's translated patience in the New King James there. But endurance is a character trait needed if you're going to be useful to God and pleasing to God.

Another trait that comes through suffering is compassion. God told the Jews in Exodus 23, 9, Also you shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt. In other words, you suffered, you were slaves, you were foreigners away from home, you were uncomfortable for 430 years.

Now you ought to know what it's like. Now you don't oppress strangers. You have compassion on them.

You have the heart of a stranger because you suffered. And now you are expected to have compassion on those who are in that same condition. Compassion comes from two Latin words.

Com means with, passion means suffering. Suffering with. You can have compassion on someone only if you suffer with them.

Now it doesn't mean that you can't have compassion on someone who's suffering in ways that you have not yet suffered. But if you have true compassion, you are indeed suffering with them in their suffering. And you can only really do so in a deep level if you have experienced some kind of suffering yourself.

If you never suffer, you just can't really relate with someone who's going through suffering. You can try to imagine what it's like, but it's going through suffering that really makes you feel it. My first marriage ended in divorce, my wife ran off with someone else.

That hurts. But you know what? Ever since that time, I've had so much compassion on people whose marriages have gone south like that. I mean, I know what that feels like.

I could only imagine what it felt like before. I'm not saying those of you who have never been through that need to go through that. I hope you don't.

But many people do. And the fact that I have been through that, I'll tell you, whenever I hear... I mean, I cannot watch a television show or read a story about adultery without burning. Paul said, who stumbles and I don't burn.

You know, there is a suffering with that I happen to know from having been through something like that. And when you suffer, you're going through compassion training, compassion conditioning. And that's what God hopes to work in you, among other things.

In Hebrews 5.2, it talks about the high priest of the Old Testament. Speaking of the idealized high priest, it says, He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since He Himself is also subject to weakness. He's been through it.

So He has compassion on those who are going through it. Speaking specifically of Jesus, it says in Hebrews 4.15, We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. When He's been through the meat grinder, He can relate.

He is not unsympathetic. Compassion, sympathy is worked by suffering. Another thing in our character that is worked through suffering is obedience.

Even Jesus, it says in Hebrews 5.8 and 9, Though He was a son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him. Jesus learned obedience through the

things He suffered.

That doesn't mean He was disobedient before He suffered. What it means is that He went through the paces of obedience just like we do, and He found out how much it hurts. The lessons of obedience are painful lessons.

He went through the full range of suffering and testing in order to learn the whole depths of what obedience involved. And we go through that too. In Psalm 119 and verse 67, the psalmist says, Before I was afflicted, I went astray.

But now I keep your word. I'm obedient now. Now that I've been afflicted.

Before I was afflicted, I didn't obey. Now I do obey. Why? I don't want to go through that again.

Jonah learned his lesson. God said, Go to Nineveh. Jonah said, I think I'm going to Tarshish.

God says, You think so. God pursued him. Sent a storm.

He was thrown overboard. He sent a fish. He got to cool his heels there in the cooler for about three days.

And then he got vomited out. And God came back and said, Do you want to go to Nineveh now? God didn't have the fish vomit him out at Nineveh. It was landlocked country.

He couldn't do that. It was still up to Jonah to make the decision. Do you want to go now? Yes, I really want to go now.

Why? Because I don't like it in there. I've suffered. And before I was afflicted, I went astray.

But now I'll keep your word. I'll do what you say. Learned my lesson.

So, learning obedience. Also, obtaining comfort from God is a fruit of suffering. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 1-4 that God comforts us in all our tribulation.

That we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted of God. When you've gone through deep waters and God has given you a word of comfort or has given you some substantial comfort, some tangible comfort, then when you meet people who are in those kinds of afflictions, you have something to offer them. Experiencing the comfort of God is desirable.

Jesus said, Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Now, wouldn't you think it would be more blessed not to ever mourn so you don't need to be comforted?

Wouldn't it be nicer if we never suffered and didn't need any comfort? Why is it a blessing to suffer and be comforted? More than to not suffer and not be comforted. Obviously, Paul seemed to think that to be comforted by God, even though it requires that we suffer first so we can be comforted, is more desirable than never to have known suffering and never to have known that comfort.

God draws near at times of suffering to His people. God is near to the broken heart, the Bible says. And at times of suffering, the nearness of God can be sensed and is genuinely different in comforting His children in a way that is worth it.

It's worth suffering to know that comfort, to know that nearness. Another thing that's worked through suffering is trust in God. 2 Corinthians 1.9, Paul said, Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves.

He's talking about in the context of how when he went to Asia, he had horrible trials. He said he was pressed beyond measure, above strength, so much the disparate of life itself. And he says, Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raised the dead.

Oh, this is so much a necessary part of suffering. When you're rich, when you're healthy, when you're comfortable, when there's no invaders in your land, when you are secure, trusting God is more in theory than in reality. You can say, I trust God, but really for what? What do you need Him for? You're in great shape, but let your money be taken from you.

Let your health be taken from you. Let your land be invaded by foreigners who want to kill you and put you in concentration camps. Then you learn, I think I better trust God.

You know why? Because I can't trust my money. It's not there anymore. I can't trust my good health.

It's gone. I can't trust in anything but God. Now, to be reduced to that is no tragedy.

To be reduced to that is what we need at times so that we can trust God. Trusting God is a blessing. Trusting God is necessary.

It's a character trait that we have to develop. It has to be there. We have to grow in it.

A lady was talking to a friend of hers, and she said, how are things going with that trial you're going through? She says, well, we've tried everything. We've been to the doctor. We've consulted all the specialists, and they just can't do anything for us.

There's nothing left for us to do but just trust God. And her friend said, alas, has it come to that? Have things gotten so badly that we now have to trust God? We have known very little of trusting God because we've had so many other things to trust. When God

takes some of those crutches away and we fall down and we're hurting, that's when we learn to look up.

That's when we learn to trust God. We learn the lesson of faith when the sentence of death is in us and we can't save our lives. God does that so that we will learn not to trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead, Paul said.

It is a lesson of faith intended. Speaking of people who go out at sea, in Psalm 107, verses 26-28, it says, they who go out to sea see the works of God. It talks about they go out on a tranquil sea, then the storm comes in, and the waves are getting big, and it says they mount up to the heavens.

It means the waves. They go down into the depths. Speaking of the sailors, it says, their soul melts because of trouble.

They reel to and fro and stagger like drunken men, and at their wits' end, then they cry out to the Lord in their troubles. And he brings them out of their distresses. In other words, when they're at their wits' end, when there's nothing else they can do, their life is in danger, they can't do a thing for themselves, what do they do then? I guess we better call out to God.

I guess we better trust God. Sufferings are essential for this. You can trust God some without much suffering, but the more suffering you endure, the more you have an opportunity to learn to trust God and to see His faithfulness in those times.

Humility is another thing that suffering can work in your character. And boy, is that a hard trait to get. It is hard to get humble.

We are always told to humble ourselves, but when we humble ourselves, we're proud of ourselves for humbling ourselves. We are so naturally proud. It is so hard to get that pride out and to be really, truly humble.

But suffering is a really good chisel for that. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12, 7, after he talked about the glorious revelations he had being caught up in the third heaven and all, he said, But lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of these revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. You can get proud about those kind of things.

You get caught up in the third heaven, you're the only person who knows you've been there. You feel kind of spiritually superior. But then, when your eyes are oozing pus all the time, it's kind of humbling.

Affliction can be very humbling. And to be free from affliction too long really nurtures the pride because it makes us feel so self-confident. It's when things beyond our control that we would stop if we could happen to us, that we suddenly feel our mortality, our



weakness, and we really learn true humility.

Another thing related to this that we learn from suffering is prayerfulness. Anyone here have the prayer life they want? It's okay if you raise your hand. Some people do.

I don't. I have an idealized prayer life I'd love to have. I've read about that life in other people's lives.

I just don't have it. I've tried to get it. I'm determined to have it.

I've disciplined myself to rise at four in the morning and to do it. But to make a long story short, I still don't have that prayer life. I would love to be more prayerful.

I pray that God will give me more of a spirit of prayer. But you know how He gives you a spirit of prayer? By taking you to your wit's end. And putting a sentence of death on you so you can't trust in yourself and you have to cry out to God.

Suffering inculcates a prayerful spirit in a right-minded person. Paul, speaking about the same thorn in his flesh in 2 Corinthians 12, in verse 8, he says, For this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. Well, it didn't depart from him, but you know what? He prayed three times more because he had that thorn than he would have prayed if he hadn't.

He was more prayerful because of that thorn than he would have been if he didn't have that thorn. That suffering brought him prayerfulness. When the apostles were beaten before the Sanhedrin and threatened that if they kept preaching the Gospel, they were going to be put to death, we read of their reaction in Acts 4.24. It says, And being let go, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.

So when they had heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said, Lord. And then we have their prayer. What did they do? They were suffering, so what did they do? They prayed.

They were more prayerful. If they didn't suffer, they might not have prayed like that or at that particular time. James said in James 5.13, Is any one of you suffering? Let him pray.

And it's the right response to suffering is pray. There's a story in the 14th chapter of 2 Samuel of how Absalom was allowed by his father to come back after he'd been a rebel, but he was ostracized and he wanted Joab to reintroduce him to his father and get amnesty for him. And so Absalom sent a messenger to Joab's house and said, Tell Joab I want to talk to him.

But Joab saw that Absalom was out of favor with the king, so he ignored the invitation. So Absalom sent another messenger. Tell Joab I want to talk to him.

But he ignored the messenger. So Absalom said to his servant, Go burn Joab's barley crop. So the guy went and said, Joab's barley crop I'm fine.

Joab came storming over and said, Absalom, why did you have your servant burn up my barley crop? Absalom said, because I wanted to talk to you. It worked. Sometimes God desperately wants us to talk to him.

But when things are peaceful for us, we don't need to. But let him burn up our barley crop. And we come storming over, God, what's going on? Help! He says, well, it worked, didn't it? It works prayerfulness in you.

That's a good thing. That's the fruit of righteousness. You know what else that works in you? It's homesickness for heaven.

All of us are a little too at home in this world, I fear. If you were in China or Cuba or North Korea and a Christian there, you probably wouldn't feel real at home in this world. You'd probably be longing for heaven.

Right here, I've met Christians who say, I hope Jesus doesn't come too soon because I kind of want to enjoy this a little more before I go to heaven. I had a friend who said, when I go to Hawaii, he said, he's a surfer, he loves Hawaii. So when I go to Hawaii, I just say, Lord, don't come very soon, please.