

LESSON 10

Suffering

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Throughout Christian history, suffering has always been seen as a great mystery with no clear answer. Next to the Trinity (one divine nature and three persons), it is the greatest mystery of all—which means that we will never totally understand it.

If you study suffering in Scripture, you will see that there has been a gradual change in trying to explain it, which has led to a deepened understanding of the real meaning of suffering. Following are the stages of understanding that we find in Scripture:

Stage 1: Everything that exists or happens is caused by God, the Creator. This means that when human beings suffer, it must be because of

- a. their *sins*. ("Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?" [John 9:2].)
- b. as a *discipline*, to teach the suffering some great lesson. ("...you understand that your faith is only put to the test to make you patient..." [James 1:3].)

Stage 2: People began to question whether there might not be innocent sufferers who do not deserve it. The best example of this is the Book of Job, one of the last books of the Hebrew Scriptures to be written (the likeliest date is in the 5th Century BC). At the end of Job, God speaks and tells Job's "friends," who extensively quote Scripture to prove that Job must be a sinner, that they are wrong. God does not answer the problem, but indicates that none of them know what they are talking about.

Stage 3: In Jesus (his teaching and actions), we have a new teaching. As we see him, as Messiah, he shows us that God is, as it were, on our side. He regards suffering and sickness, as a father or mother would, as an evil (not a blessing sent by God). He ardently desires to free his children from sickness and evil.

Stage 4: He passed on his healing power and authority to us, his followers, so that we might, even now, bring the kingdom of heaven to this earth.

In the New Testament, God is revealed as being on the side of life, health, and joy. Yet, over the centuries, Christians moved back in the direction of emphasizing redemptive suffering, so that the healing ministry gradually diminished, quoting Paul's statement that he made up in his body the suffering that was needed to complete the body of Christ (2 Corinthians 12:7-10, 2 Corinthians 6:3-10, and Philippians 1:29-30).

In the next life, all tears shall be wiped away (Revelation 21:4), but even now the new life—the kingdom of God—is at hand. The eradication of sickness and suffering is not total, but healing is a down-payment on the kingdom of God and is a sign of the future. Suffering is always part of life, but it can have meaning and its causes can be healed by God, our loving Father. We pray and ask the Spirit's guidance to see when to pray for healing and to have expectant faith when we pray for God's suffering people.

HIGHLIGHTS

1. Suffering is a great mystery, but we must understand something about it and God's attitudes towards it if we are to have true expectant faith in our healing prayer. Does God expect us to accept sickness or to pray for it to be healed?
2. Before Jesus, the basic understanding was that God caused everything that happened, whether it was good or bad. If you sin, you will suffer and receive a deserved punishment for your sins.
» *1 Samuel 18:10-11 and Deuteronomy 20*
3. With such an understanding—that God is the source of both good and evil—how do we regard the question of bad things happening to good people? Before Jesus came into this world, the best answer to the question of good people suffering was contained in the Book of Job, which tells us that there is something wrong in our world that brings suffering to the innocent, but that we do not and cannot understand it. Jesus reinforces this message by telling his listeners to forget about asking this question and simply realize that there is mystery here that we cannot solve. "Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?" (Luke 13:4).
» *Book of Job, Psalm 37:20-25, and John 9:1-3*
4. When Jesus comes into the world, he shows us how we should respond to suffering by always taking the side of life and health. Whenever he meets someone who is suffering and sick, he treats the sickness as evil and brings healing and freedom to that person.
» *John 9:4-7 and Matthew 17:14-21*
5. Jesus comes to model for us the kind of faith we are to have and the healing action we are to take, operating in the power of the Holy Spirit.
» *Matthew 9:35-38 and Luke 10:1*
6. Jesus passed his ministry on to his disciples, yet we seem to still be in bondage to needless

SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

① *notes commentary by Francis MacNutt*

1 Samuel 18:10-11

The next day an evil spirit from God came forcefully upon Saul. He was prophesying in his house, while David was playing the harp, as he usually did. Saul had a spear in his hand and he hurled it, saying to himself, "I'll pin David to the wall." But David eluded him twice.

① *This is an example of God seemingly causing evil. This is based on the belief that everything that exists and everything that happens is caused by God. This is the teaching that the Book of Job questions.*

Deuteronomy 20 and the Book of Job

① *Read these Scriptures for examples of Old Testament understanding of curses brought on by God when people do not follow the laws. Additionally, at the end of the Book of Job, God tells Job that the popular understanding of suffering is inaccurate, for there is a mystery involved in suffering that humans do not and cannot understand.*

Psalm 37:20-25

But the wicked will perish: The Lord's enemies will be like the beauty of the fields, they will vanish—vanish like smoke. The wicked borrow and do not repay, but the righteous give generously; those the Lord blesses will inherit the land, but those he curses will be cut off. If the Lord delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand. I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread.

① *This teaching that all sickness is deserved is precisely the teaching that is questioned in Job, and then later Jesus confronts it even more directly.*

John 9:1-3

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life."

John 9:4-7

(Jesus speaking) "As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." Having said this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

Matthew 17:14-21

When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. "Lord, have mercy on my son," he said. "He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him." "O unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me." Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment. Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

① *Here Jesus indicates that a refusal to believe in healing and deliverance can actually be sinful.*

Matthew 9:35-38

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

① *Jesus' motivation in healing is compassion, rather than a desire to dazzle people with signs and wonders.*

Luke 10:1

After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two-by-two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go.

Matthew 7:7-11

(Jesus speaking) "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

Matthew 16:21-17:3

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

Matthew 4:8-11

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'" Then the devil left him and angels came and attended him.

① *Jesus overcomes the very human inclination to seek after fame and power. We can even use the healing ministry in a desire to profit or seek fame.*