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Weathering The Storms

The Virtue of Perseverance

by James S. Spiegel

William Faulkner wrote, "a man is the sum of his misfortunes."¹

Faulkner's observation states a profound truth. We are the product of our sufferings. Our pains forge our souls. The grief we've borne drapes our mental landscapes, and our moral characters are the direct result of how we've responded to suffering. The moral skill that is both a requirement and a result of suffering is perseverance. As one manages to "keep the faith" through suffering, one grows even stronger to deal with whatever further suffering one may experience.

To internalize this from a Christian perspective is a great challenge. Our thinking about suffering is steadily infiltrated by cultural influences, so we must resist the temptation to conform to worldly patterns of thought as we reflect on the subject. Indeed, to present a biblical view on suffering is to highlight just how countercultural it is.

Three Sorrows

I don't pretend to be an expert sufferer. Yet I'm no stranger to suffering. My first major sorrow came in my youth when my family moved from Detroit to Jackson, Mississippi, wrenching me away from my siblings, my friends, and all that was familiar to me. To disorient me even further, puberty struck at the same time, and the hormonal confusion compounded the pain. I fell into a clinical depression that lasted several months. It is said that the grief of the young is especially deep because youth lack the experience to know that time heals. "This too shall pass," my mother told me repeatedly during that first cruel summer in Mississippi. She was right, but I couldn't comprehend her meaning. And to this day that sorrow remains the worst I've ever known, if only because I was so helpless to deal with it.

Nearly a decade ago as a new instructor at Taylor University, I experienced a major trial that took the form of betrayal. My first wife was unfaithful to me and had no interest in repenting or reconciling. The emotions I experienced were wide ranging, but all of them were excruciating, from rage to shame and everything in between. Even with the perspective of adulthood, I found it difficult to imagine full recovery when in the throes of my divorce. But the friends and colleagues God provided me were ever-present helps in that valley, and with the passage of time, healing did come. Today, my new wife, Amy, and our three children are constant reminders of just how wondrously excessive the grace of God can be.

My third major life trial to date came with the passing of my father in the summer of 2001. His death was actually only the bitter culmination of a decade long sorrow. For years my dad battled emphysema, a degenerating lung condition that slowly and mercilessly suffocates the person. He was a good dad,

¹ William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Modern Library, 1956), 129.

dedicated to his family, faithful to his wife, and a wild fan of his four sons, each of whom he convinced was his favorite. But because of a long train of hypocrisies he'd witnessed, he had no use for anything religious, particularly of an organized sort. When he nearly died in the summer of 1997, he finally gave in to my urgings that he start reading the Bible. He read the entire New Testament and some of the gospels repeatedly. In the end, he did believe in God but could not bring himself to believe in miracles, including, of course, the virgin birth of Christ and his resurrection. Death caught him before that belief ever came. Having prayed for two decades that he'd embrace these things, I always figured it would eventually happen. But apparently it didn't, at least not on this side of the grave.

So I've experienced being displaced, betrayed, and bereaved. But I'm not unique. Most of us have our stories of loss, despair, and deep disappointment. And for those who do not, they eventually will. Many struggle with mental illness or know the grief of miscarriage or infertility; some experience devastating physical injuries or even the death of a child. Worldwide, suffering is, of course, rampant, even gruesome in some cases. Tens of thousands have been tortured at the hands of cruel people in Bosnia, Rwanda, Iraq, and other countries. Even now innocent people are becoming victims of genocide, systematic rape, child slavery. These things happen daily all over the world. Truly, Dostoevsky was right when he said, "The earth is soaked from its crust to its center" with the tears of humanity.²

The Gift of Suffering

Friedrich Nietzsche is supposed to have said, "What does not kill me makes me stronger." Like Faulkner, Nietzsche glimpsed a significant truth, although it tells only part of the story. Some people are crushed by their suffering, although they do survive it. But for those who are able to sustain faith through their suffering, the experience often does make them stronger. This is the crucial biblical truth that should inform all our thinking on suffering. Suffering is one of God's preferred means to build the strong soul, and that strength occurs in at least three areas: in moral maturity, in empathy, and in the way to the inner life of God.

First, suffering is the way to moral maturity. This theme emerges repeatedly in Scripture. James says, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4). Here James directly links the attainment of moral maturity to suffering trials. Peter does the same thing when he writes, "Though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith, of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire, may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:6-7). Peter connects suffering with the building of faith itself. And the prophet Isaiah makes a similar point in passing when he asserts that "the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction" (30:20). These metaphors suggest that adversity and affliction actually provide spiritual nourishment. In these and many other biblical passages the point resounds: Suffering has a purpose for the person of faith. And that purpose is the building of moral maturity, a better character.

If that's not enough motivation to endure suffering with joy, consider this: We take our characters with us into the next world. God doesn't form our souls from scratch again once we arrive in heaven.

² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: William Heinemann, 1945), 224.

Otherwise, we wouldn't be recognizable for who we are when we get there! So the stakes are high; the payoff of obedience and perseverance through suffering is for the real long term, even eternity.

So I'm grateful for the suffering I've experienced. Today, I already glimpse many of the moral benefits that it's brought to me. From my displacement I gained greater understanding of the world and different cultures. The experience also increased my appreciation for people who are different from me, and it built my capacity to endure hardship. Through my betrayal I learned better how to trust God even through blinding pain. I gained a whole new dimension of understanding with regard to his faithfulness. In my bereavement I learned that my perplexity over God's ways in no way tells against his justice. I found, too, that his peace is mysterious and transcendent, beyond what reason can plumb.

James, Peter, and Isaiah just might be correct after all! Our trials form the very road to moral maturity. What a sad irony, then, that we so resent our suffering, that at times we'll do all we can to resist or avoid it. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke comments on this fact: "We wasters of sorrows! How we stare away into sad endurance beyond them, trying to foresee their end! Whereas they are nothing else than our winter foliage, our somber evergreen, one of the seasons of our interior year, not only season, they're also place, settlement, camp, soil, dwelling."³

Not only is suffering the way to moral maturity, it's the way to empathy toward others who suffer. Paul's words are, in fact, explicit: God is the "Father of compassion, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (2 Cor. 1:3-4). He further says to the church at Corinth, "If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer" (v.6).

Empathy makes grace contagious and does so in two related ways. It enhances our ability to help others as well as our desire to do so. We tend to want to help those with whom we can emotionally identify, and such identification is a function of the degree to which we have shared their experiences.

Here's another way of making the same point: the moral core of our faith is the Golden Rule: Do to others as you would have them do to you. Your ability to apply this maxim is only as strong as your capacity to understand your neighbor's point of view. Suffering through a variety of difficulties broadens your perspective on the human experience and provides new points of identification with others. This in turn enables you to imagine what your neighbor would want in a particular situation. You know because, as they say, you've been there and done that. Consequently, you're better at applying the Golden Rule, which is to say, you're a better Christian. And all because you've suffered.

As an aside, growth in empathy is one of the reasons art is morally valuable. It enables us to enter into other people's experience, to see things from their point of view and thus to empathize. It follows, then, that those who reserve little place in their lives for the arts are morally impoverished. They've blocked out of their lives a rich bank of insight into the human experience and so much empathy that goes with it. On the positive side, it also explains why artists themselves, musicians, sculptors, painters, etc., tend to be empathetic people. Have you ever heard of a racist poet?

My own sorrows have made me a more empathetic person. My displacement has made me more sensitive to those who are cultural aliens, social outcasts, or misfits. It's also made me more sympathetic

³ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), 79.

toward oppressed people, whether due to their race, sex, or beliefs. My bereavement has made me more sympathetic with those whose loved ones have died. My betrayal has softened my heart toward those who go through divorce and other humiliating trials. Consequently, I'm better equipped to help them through it, as I've done several times and as I did recently with one former student. I'll call him "John." A year or so ago his wife left him, and John tried to recoup. But, he said,

The thing is, I can't seem to get over it. I can't move on. It's so hard to think that someone you loved and you thought loved you could do such a thing. I have absolutely no self-esteem. I can't sleep. Every day I wonder what any of this crazy life is for. What are we supposed to be or how are we supposed to be? She didn't even think twice about our breakup. To her it was like a high school relationship ending. I live with this guilt every day that I should have been a better husband, that maybe if I was she wouldn't have left. This guilt and sorrow pushes against my chest every day, trying to steal my breath.

The sense of despair John shares here, loneliness, humiliation, self-doubt, shame, these feelings I know from the inside. I once occupied that room in the earthly hell that is divorce. He knows this and has told me that my words of encouragement mean more to him than they otherwise would.

The redemptive power of suffering was clearly glimpsed by the twentieth century's greatest saint, Mother Teresa. She observed that Jesus shared "our life, our loneliness, our agony, our death. Only by being one with us has he redeemed us. We are allowed to do the same." Notice how her language suggests suffering is a privilege. She continues, "All the desolation of the poor people, not only their material poverty, but their spiritual destitution, must be redeemed, and we must share it, for only by being one with them can we redeem them, that is, by bringing God into their lives and bringing them to God."⁴

Not only is suffering the way to moral maturity and the way to empathy, it's the way to the inner life of God. Paul declares his desire "to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings" (Phil 3:10). As Paul saw it, a natural, even necessary, connection linked Christ's mission and means. So for those of us who intend to share in his mission, we must welcome the similarly painful means as well. Thomas á Kempis writes, "No man so feels in his heart the passion of Christ as he who suffers."⁵ This explains why suffering so powerfully motivates Christian faith and devotion. As we feel what Christ felt, we begin to see with his eyes and eventually to will as he wills, which is, of course, our calling.

It should be clarified that the sort of suffering to which biblical writers and Thomas á Kempis refer is not mere discomfort or unfulfilled desire for luxury. Not getting what you want is not suffering; it's just a normal part of life. Some students on our campus, for example, have recently complained about being denied off-campus housing. A few of them have remarked that the experience has caused them deep grief. To label it as such grossly cheapens the concept. Imagine what some Rwandans, Bosnians, Asian Indians, or even the destitute in America would think of so describing such petty disappointments. They'd be incredulous and rightly so, because not getting what you don't need is not suffering and is no cause for grief.

⁴ Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 68.

⁵ Thomas á Kempis, *Of the Imitation of Christ* (Pittsburgh; Whitaker, 1981), 87.

Intimacy with God is a popular subject today among Christians. That's good, at least to the extent that the concept is understood biblically. But it's rarely understood so. More times than I can count I've heard Christian speakers talk passionately about intimacy with Christ. Seldom, if ever, do they mention that such intimacy must involve suffering. How strange, since the New Testament writers stressed this fact, as did Jesus himself when he declared that to follow him we must each take up our cross, and as Paul does when he says, "It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him" (Phil. 1:29).

What I glimpsed of the inner life of God through my trials was his agony in Christ. Through my displacement, I better understand how Christ agonized in the self-emptying that Paul describes in Philippians 2. Through my betrayal, I better see the agony of Christ in being betrayed by his friend. Through my bereavement, I taste the agony of feeling forsaken by God and something of the agony of death itself, a face-to-face encounter with the cruelest darkness, all things experienced by Christ at Golgotha. In the measure of agony I share with Christ, we touch. Through my sorrows I know something of his own. Suffering is the road to the inner life of God and what Catholics have called "beatific vision," that is, a means by which we behold aspects of divine beauty otherwise hidden to us. Perhaps this is why Peter says, "He who has suffered in his body is done with sin" (1 Peter 4:1). To glimpse such beauty is to be changed.

False Perspectives on Suffering

The Christian perspective on suffering, then, is that it's a God-ordained means of maturing us, making us more empathetic, and disclosing to us his inner beauty. It's no surprise if you've never thought about suffering in this way, given our cultural mindset that suffering is intrinsically evil. Even some theologians have made this error, in spite of the plain biblical evidence to the contrary. Where, though, did the idea that suffering is an intrinsic evil come from? Its ultimate origin is found in ancient Greek philosophy. Plato and Aristotle regarded the emotions generally as lower grade faculties of the soul. So suffering, as an emotional phenomenon, was naturally viewed as essentially a defect. This notion was passed on to the Stoics who idealized the very opposite of emotion: apathy and resignation. Through Augustine, this low view of emotion, and suffering specifically, was transmitted to Christian theology.

Today in the twenty-first-century Western world, the view that suffering is evil is reinforced by medical science. The history of Western medicine is characterized by a slow but steady expansion of its aim, from seeking remedy for illness and injury to easing all pain (note that the two are not equivalent). The same trend has occurred in the fields of psychology and counseling. The original legitimate aim to maintain mental health and address mental disorders has expanded into the broader goal of easing all psychic pain. But perhaps most disturbing has been the intrusion of this mindset into the realm of ethics. It is now common even for Christians to use pain avoidance as a primary guideline for conduct. The consequences of such an approach are, of course, morally devastating.

Suffering is most emphatically not an intrinsic evil, as proven by the fact that Scripture affirms it to be God's will in many cases, such as Isaiah's declaration regarding the coming Messiah: "It was the LORD'S will to crush him and cause him to suffer" (Isa. 53:10). And if ever a final statement was made about God's sovereignty over suffering, it is the book of Job. Here is a case that illustrates acute suffering, often dismissed by Christians as simply the work of the Devil. Those who do so appear to have overlooked the summation found in the book's last chapter. The writer notes that Job's brothers, sisters, and friends "comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the LORD had brought upon him" (Job

42:11). Note how the text says the Lord brought Job's troubles upon him. Satan, evidently, was a secondary cause, a mere lackey. So it goes for all our suffering. Although it may result from the sinful choices of wicked people or Satan himself, God purposes our suffering to benefit us. Thus, it is not intrinsically evil.

In regard to this plain teaching of Scripture, it would be appropriate here to address a couple of unbiblical responses, the twin errors of asceticism and apathy. The ascetic response is that since suffering is such a valuable means to sanctify us and make us more Christlike, then we should actively inflict pain upon ourselves to accelerate this process. "After all," says the ascetic, "if God can purpose suffering for my good, then why can't I?" It should be noted first that while asceticism has been popular in other cultures and other times in Christian history, it's not much of an issue among American Christians today. Still, this opinion deserves a response. The problem with asceticism is twofold. For one thing it's narcissistic. The person who actually seeks pain for her own benefit maintains a too narrow moral focus. Even the ultimate hope that one's moral growth from ascetic practice will benefit others does not justify the preoccupation with self that it involves. Also, asceticism is self-defeating, because such artificial, self-imposed pain necessarily subtracts the most edifying element of suffering: the thwarting of one's will. If you get to choose precisely how and when you experience pain, then you haven't suffered in the full sense. True suffering goes against one's will. So asceticism should be rejected because it is both self-serving and self-defeating.

The other objection regards our response to the suffering of others. It's expressed in these questions: "If suffering is ultimately a benefit, then why alleviate others' pain? How can we justify comforting other people who suffer?" Again there's a twofold reply. We should help others who suffer because, frankly, we are commanded to do so. More than being commanded, it is assumed by biblical writers that we will do so (such as by Paul in 2 Cor. 1). So, notwithstanding that suffering can help others, we should seek to comfort them. And by doing so, we edify the victims all the more, because we are being Christ to them. Our service provides a further avenue for growth for those we comfort, as they see God's provision in our help and are thus encouraged in their faith. A second reason to help others who suffer is the Golden Rule. We appreciate it when others help us, so we should help others and leave the positive use of suffering to God. As the owner of all that is, it is God's prerogative to bring suffering into the lives he chooses for his own purposes. As his servants, who have been told to alleviate suffering and comfort those in pain, we should do so.

The biblical approach to suffering can be summed up in the following three points:

1. We should expect suffering (as Peter says, there is nothing strange in it, but it is natural to our fallen condition).
2. We should minister to those who suffer (because we've been commanded to and because we'd want others to minister to us).
3. We should think about suffering under the aspect of eternity, as God's chosen means to bring about greater goods in the world, including our moral growth, increased empathy, and union with God.

Admittedly, the necessity of suffering and our mandate to relieve suffering creates something like a moral paradox (analogous to such doctrines as the Trinity, the divine incarnation, and the predestination of free human actions). But it's biblical truth.

An attempt has been made herein to clarify this third point, that we should think about our suffering under the aspect of eternity. We must evaluate our own theology of suffering with a special alertness to what Scripture has to say on the topic. In the process we'll not only gain a more biblical outlook on the matter but also discover greater inner peace. To embrace God's making suffering our lot is to surrender the unrealistic and destructive craving that we can find final and lasting comfort on this side of paradise. The lasting joy of which the Bible speaks will come only in the next life. The joy we have now is very real and blessed, but only a dim reflection of what awaits us. Moreover, our joy on earth is destined to intermingle with our blessed sorrow.

It seems appropriate to close this chapter with the words of William Blake, an individual who was on intimate terms with grief. He put it this way:

Man was made for joy and woe;
And when this we rightly know,
Through the world we safely go.
Joy and woe are woven fine,
A clothing for the soul divine;
Under every grief and pine
Runs a joy with silken twine.⁶

God will keep his promise that we must suffer, in small ways and great. But our suffering is a means of grace. He has ordained pain and sorrow as teachers. This is the hard Christian truth. Let us resist our culture's tendency to blind us to it. Moral maturity, empathy toward others, beatific vision: suffering is the way of passage to some of God's richest blessings.

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⁶ William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence," in *Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Nonesuch Library, 1956), 76.