

Suffering as a gift - Hope pt2 -

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Preacher: Jonny Grant

[0 : 0 0] We pray for peace, comfort for our families, protection while we sleep. We pray for healing, we pray for prosperity.

We pray for your mighty hand to ease our sufferings. And all the while, you hear each spoken need, yet love is way too much to give us lesser things.

You see, for Laura, God had always seen God as a kind of handyman. When something goes wrong, you simply dial up in prayer and God fixes it.

But with the news of this brain tumour and her husband's illness, it appeared that God was no longer loving and no longer powerful.

You see, like Laura, we can think the only good thing God can ever do is to heal and ease our sufferings.

[1 : 0 1] But as the song says, the last line, yet love is way too much to give us lesser things. In other words, suffering in the loving hands of God can be used for good in our lives and in the lives of others and ultimately for God's glory.

A key verse that we've been thinking about through this series is Romans 8.28, which says, And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. In all things, in every suffering of life, when cancer strikes, when depression weighs us down, when an accident takes a loved one, when circumstances overwhelm us, in all things, in every suffering of life, God works for good.

That doesn't mean that suffering is itself good. Rather, all suffering in the hands of God is used for good purposes. As the author Joni puts it, God uses what he hates to accomplish what he loves.

So rather than see suffering as a curse, through the eyes of Christ we can see it as a gift we can thank God for.

[2 : 5 0] So this morning we're going to follow on from where we finished last week and together we're going to see five more ways God uses suffering for good purposes.

So purpose number one. Embracing suffering as a gift produces a Christ-like beauty.

Have a look at James chapter 1. If we're Christians, we all want, or at least we should desire, to become more Christ-like.

Let me read chapter 1, verse 2. Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. The goal or the results of suffering can lead to, look at the end of verse 4, a life that is mature, complete, and not lacking anything.

- [4 : 11] Or as I've summarised, suffering produces a Christ-like beauty. Let's see how that works out. Look at verse 2. Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials.
- Not if you face trials, but whenever you face trials. The Christian life doesn't guarantee a suffering-free life. We will suffer in all kinds of different ways.
- But perhaps the greatest surprise is not the fact that we will suffer, but how we should think about our suffering. Again, look at the beginning of verse 2. Consider it pure joy.
- How can we be joyful when you're crippled up in pain or you're grieving as you buried your loved one?
- What's joyful about any of those circumstances? Well, it doesn't mean we're to force a smile or pretend that life is fun all the time.
- [5 : 17] Rather, as it says in verse 2, we are to consider, we are to think about how our trials can be used for good so we can be joyful in what suffering produces in our life.
- Verse 3, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Suffering nurtures.
- It grows and it strengthens and fuels our faith so that we persevere, that we become steadfast, that we are strong in our faith.
- Family friends of ours have had their fair share of suffering. Their daughter was born with a severe disability and needs 24-7 care.
- As a young teen, I remember talking to the dad about it all and asking him why God had allowed this suffering in their lives. And his answer was something like this.
- [6 : 28] He says, Johnny, I don't know all the reasons, but it strengthens our faith for what we may face in the future.
- It strengthens our faith today for what we may face in the future. Suffering produces a perseverance, a steadfastness.
- But that's not the goal, is it? It's not the completion of it. Look at verse 4. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.
- Suffering is not a good thing in and of itself, but what it produces is good. It can grow our faith so that we become all that God intends us to be, which is to be Christ-like, mature, complete, and not lacking anything.
- You see, from our earthly perspective, when suffering comes, usually suffering takes things from us. It takes away our health.
- [7 : 36] It takes away our job security. It can take away our loved ones. But in the hands of God, suffering gives to us.
- It gives something back, something deeper into our lives, to the point of where we can say, we lack nothing. We lack nothing. Even though things are stripped away, we lack nothing.
- Sam Albury put it like this, suffering is an opportunity to gain the most valuable thing on earth. We gain something.
- We receive the most valuable thing on earth, a faith that is complete and lacking nothing. Maturity and depth in our relationship with God.
- You see, through suffering, we become all that God wants us to be. We become more beautiful in our character. We love, we comfort, we give, we serve.
- [8 : 39] So first, embracing suffering as a gift produces a Christ-like beauty. Second, embracing suffering as a gift guarantees our future salvation.

I'm sure like me, there are times you doubt and wonder if you are ever going to enjoy God's eternal kingdom. That your faith, because we fail so often, we think, I'm just not going to make it.

I keep slipping up and messing up. Well, suffering can lead to an absolute assurance. Just go on a couple of pages to the next letter.

First Peter, chapter 1. It's just on a couple of pages. First Peter, chapter 1, verse 6.

It's a similar text to the one we just read in James, but there's a different emphasis. 1 Peter, chapter 1, starting in verse 6. In all this, you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

[10 : 03] These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith of greater worth than gold, which perishes, even though refined by fire, may result in praise, glory, and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

So just like James, Peter is saying he wants us to be joyful. Verse 6. In this you greatly rejoice. Well, what's there to be joyful about?

Well, he tells us in verse 3. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy, he's given us new birth, that's a new beginning, a new life, into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, and this inheritance is kept in heaven for you.

So our future inheritance, if we are Christians, is secure. A world to come that is untouched, by pain and the heartache of death.

A world to come that is unspoiled by the selfish, evil actions of people. This is our glorious inheritance that we look forward to. But what happens when we go through trials and my faith is rocked and my doubts take over and I think I'm never going to get there because I can't see how it's ever possible.

[11 : 43] Well, look at verse 7. He says, These have come. God has allowed trials in your life. God has chosen not to remove the suffering you are going through.

Why? For what purpose? Verse 7, These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith of greater worth than gold which perishes even though refined by fire may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Peter uses it as an example gold in a furnace. Gold is still one of the most precious and expensive metals but before you can ever see its true value it's got to be put in the furnace and the raging temperatures of the furnace burn off everything that is worthless and impure and what is left is pure genuine gold.

Now here's the point of what Peter is getting at. He's saying, Look, even at the end of time pure gold look at verse 7 he says, Pure gold will perish but not our faith in Christ.

There's a contrast. Not our faith in Christ. Our faith in Christ is of greater value and it's much more precious than gold. So when our faith goes through the fiery trials of life when we go through the furnace of suffering when we face illness or disappointments and hurts our faith is being refined and we can be in no doubt whatsoever that it will leave a genuine true and pure faith in Christ so that look at the end of verse 7 it will result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

[13 : 53] The very thing the suffering in the trials which we fear will trip us up or cause us to fall and not attain or reach our final glory all of those things are used by God for good purposes to guarantee our future salvation.

Look at verse 9 For you are as you go through these trials you are receiving the end result of your faith the salvation of your souls So second embracing suffering as a gift guarantees our future salvation So suffering does us good but these next two is about how suffering is good in the life of others our suffering can mean good in the lives of others So third embracing suffering as a gift enables us to comfort others Go back to 2 Corinthians chapter 1 which is on page 1159 2 Corinthians chapter 1 which is on page 1159 9

So we're working hard looking at the texts to see how suffering is used for good purposes So when we go through our struggles each one of us longs and desires to be comforted We want comfort Well look at 2 Corinthians 1 verse 3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God One of the books that I've encouraged to buy there's a copy of it on the back table written by

Paul Mallard as he talks about his own wife's experience of suffering she has an incurable disease which they can't seem to quite diagnose and he comments on these verses and he explains it almost in three steps he says troubles and sufferings flow into our lives and as we go through the troubles the comfort of God floods into our lives and from this overwhelming flood of comfort is an overflowing of comfort into the lives of those who suffer so picture it this way troubles flow into our life the comfort of God floods in and that comfort overflows to others in their pain and hurts you see

God is not immune to the troubles we go through look at verse 3 it tells us he is the father of our Lord Jesus Christ the father who comforted his son through his life and ministry is the same father who comforts us through our faith in Christ we have a relationship with the father that the son enjoyed and experienced so God our father sees us he understands and he responds to us his children with compassion he comes alongside this is what it means to comfort he draws alongside he enters into our suffering and he supports us he steadies us he strengthens us and encourages us Martin Luther once said three things make a great pastor prayer meditation and suffering because

[18 : 34] Luther had come to understand that through his own sufferings and struggles he came to experience God's love and encouragement in a deeper way and it enabled him to understand the suffering of others who he cared for and how he then in turn could bring the comfort of God into their lives and I think that's so true in our own experience think about some of the most caring compassionate and comforting people that you know invariably they are people who suffer terribly in their own lives why is that because through their trials they've learned to embrace suffering as a gift and have experienced God's comfort flood into their lives and in turn it overflows it bubbles out from them into the life of others things

I wonder if you've ever thought of your suffering in that light before look at verse 6 Paul continues he says if we are distressed if we go through a personal trial or trouble he says it's for your comfort and salvation and if we're comforted if we experience the comfort of God well that too is for your comfort which will produce in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer so our suffering can be wasted if the comfort we receive from God is never passed on God our sovereign father allows suffering in the life of his children so that we experience the flooding in of his compassion so that the comfort we receive may overflow into the life of others and there may be a day when those who you comfort today will be those very people who will comfort you in the future so third embracing suffering as a gift enables us to comfort others fourth so we've looked at two ways in which the

God uses suffering for good in our own lives and how now it leads to the good of others for their comfort and fourth embracing suffering as a gift leads to the salvation of others just jump on a page to 2 Corinthians chapter 4 throughout history God has used the suffering of his people to bring salvation to other people listen to what Paul says chapter 4 verse 10 read carefully he says we always carry around in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body for we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus sake so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body so then death is at work in us but life is at work in you in death comes life just as the suffering and death of

Jesus Christ results in our salvation as we trust him so our sufferings and even our death is used by God to enable others to see the salvation that is in Christ look at verse 12 so then death is at work in us but life is at work in you in other words suffering and death is not just the content of our message so we proclaim a message that is about a suffering Christ so it's not just our message but it's also the methods the means God uses let me illustrate this for you I've been reading a number of biographies recently written by John Piper 21 servants of God and one of those servants was a man called

John Patton in 1858 so a good time ago John Patton was a Scottish missionary and he sailed for the New Hebrides which is a collection of about 80 islands way down in the South Pacific those islands at that time were not an easy place to live they were described as cannibals they sometimes ate the flesh of their defeated enemies they practiced infanticide they would murder children and widow sacrifice so if the husband had died they would sacrifice the widow so that she would be of use to her husband in the world to come so he reached these islands with his wife and their newborn son in the November four months later after arriving on those islands tragedy struck Patton writes in his diary he says then in a moment altogether unexpectedly she that is my wife died on

[24 : 58] March the third to crown my sorrows and complete my loneliness the dear baby boy whom we named after her father Peter Robert Robson was taken from me after one week sickness on March 20th to compound the loss of his own wife and son in those first few months for the following four years Patton faced constant attack from the islanders he suffered awful sickness and fevers that left him falling in and out of consciousness he escaped the islands but he returned again four years later with a new wife Mary and he served on those islands for another 41 years and at the age of 63 Patton wrote this he says recall what the gospel has done on the new

Hebrides the island where he served 12,000 have been brought to sit at the feet of Christ and 133 have been trained and sent forth as teachers and preachers of the gospel and as Patton's account was heard and read throughout the world it moved literally thousands of people to go to the unreached peoples of the world and many more nations were reached and people came to Christ looking back over his hardships and the sufferings that he went through through his life he wrote this often times while passing through the perils and defeats of my first four years in the mission field I wondered why God had permitted such things but on looking back now

I already clearly perceive that the work could never have been accomplished but for the sufferings pattern is an example of what we've just read in verse 10 have a look at again we always carry around in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body now I'm quite sure we're not going to walk out of here and face cannibals or fever we may never face the loss of one of our children but if we are believers we will suffer but this does not disqualify us in God's means it qualifies us we have a message of a suffering Christ and God uses the sufferings of his people who learn to lean upon him and depend upon him to bring that same message of

Christ to a dying world so verse 12 so then death is at work in us but life is at work in you so forth embracing suffering as a gift leads to the salvation of others and then last embracing suffering as a gift displays the glory of God so often we can think that the only good thing God could ever do is to heal or to ease our suffering but suffering in the hands of our loving sovereign father is not only good for us it's not only good for others it is ultimately for God's glory look at chapter 4 verse 15 all this all the trials and struggles the sufferings that we may go through he says is for your benefit so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of

God you see when we embrace suffering as a gift when God uses it for good purposes in our lives in the lives of others we display the greatness and the beauty of God God takes the worst things the worst tragedies the worst experiences of our lives he takes them all and he uses them for good purposes he makes us more Christ like guaranteeing our future inheritance he enables us through our suffering to comfort others and to cause salvation to flow to others that is something glorious that he can take such tragedy and bring about such beauty our suffering puts the greatness and beauty of God on display if you could picture it this way imagine walking into a big art gallery and all along the walls are these portraits and you look at them each one and you study and you are just amazed at the detail and you go wow such detail but as you travel along as you walk down the corridor looking at those portraits at the very end there's this enormous portrait and it's a self portrait of the artist himself and you just gaze in wonder each one leading up to something more magnificent well can you picture it like this that you are like a portrait on the wall of

[31 : 28] God's gallery and as people walk through life and they look at your life they see the sufferings the struggles the trials that you go through they see a glimpse a display of something beautiful and glorious of something God is doing in your life and as they travel down through that gallery at the end is well the greatest self portrait of God himself of Christ on the cross a display of his glory and greatness and his sufferings and all that it achieves for the world end of verse 15 the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God as people see you through your trials and the work that

God is doing in you it is a display of the beauty of God and a pointer to the ultimate picture of Christ on the cross we started this morning gave an illustration of a modern song well we're going to finish this morning with an old song the old song some of you will know it is called God moves in a mysterious way it was written by a man called William Cooper almost 300 years ago William was a guy who loved the Lord but yet he suffered severe depression terrible darkness in his life on a number of occasions he tried to take his own life he was locked up in an asylum yet in his depression in some of his darkest times he wrote some of the most beautiful hymns in fact he he he joined forces with

John Newton and they they wrote a hymn book together John Newton of course wrote Amazing Grace and they put together beautiful hymns for their people Cooper's most well known hymn is God moves in a mysterious way one verse I want to point out we're going to sing it and listen to it in just a minute comes towards the end and this is what it says his purposes talking about God's purposes and his sufferings in our life he says God's purposes will ripen fast unfolding every hour the bud may have a bitter taste but sweet will be the flower suffering is a bitter taste and some of you know what it is to suffer and struggle but sweet are

God's glorious purposes in our life for our good for the good of others and ultimately for the glory of God so we'll remain seated we're going to play it some of you may know it but the chorus is easy to pick up on so feel free to join in as we listen but just focus meditate upon the words as we sing this together God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform He plants His footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm deep in

His dark and hidden mind with never failing skill He fashions all His bright designs and works His sovereign will So just we trust in you God we trust in you What fearful snakes new curbish fail the smile that you now dread Heart beat with mercy and to break in blessings on your head judge not the Lord by feeble sin but trust Him for His grace behind a frowning promise

[36 : 47] He hides a smiling face So God we trust in you trust in what you do Oh God we trust in you When tears are grim and comfort few We hope in mercy ever new We trust in you God's purposes will rise in time unfolding every hour working every moment The heart may have a bit it it takes but sweet will be the flower

Blind and with need be sure to end and scan His work in vain God is his own interpreter and he will make it end So God we trust in you sing so God we trust in you God we trust in you God we trust in you When tears are great and confidence few We hope and mercy ever new

We trust in Let's pray Father as we walk through this life as we face trials and struggles of many kinds Father strengthen our face as you have promised enable us to trust in you that you are working good purposes in us and through us making us more Christ like guaranteeing our future inheritance enabling us to comfort others and leading others to salvation in Christ and all for your glory and for your honor help us to trust you amen .