

Suffering as a gift – Hope

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, have your Bibles ready. We're going to be looking at a few different passages this morning.
- I came across an article about a guy called Raphael Samuel. He's 27 years old and he's suing his parents for being born.
- That's what the article's about, suing his parents for being born. Here's what it says. Mr. Samuel's belief is rooted in what's called antinatalism, a philosophy that argues that life is so full of misery that people should stop procreating immediately.
- He quotes, there's no point to humanity. So many people are suffering. If humanity is extinct, earth and animals would be happier.
- They'll certainly be better off. Also, no human will then suffer. Human existence is totally pointless. Now, we might be as extreme as Raphael Samuel, but I think he puts into words how we can all think about suffering.
- [1 : 1 9] That is, there is no purpose in suffering. It's pointless. All suffering does is bring misery, pain and sorrow.
- It achieves nothing. It accomplishes nothing. Suffering is a curse. But Scripture gives us a different perspective.
- Rather than see suffering as a curse, we should see it as a gift we can thank God for. A well-known verse, Romans 8, verse 28, 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.
- 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 our good. Now, that doesn't mean that the suffering is itself good.
- [2 : 4 0] Rather, suffering in the hands of God is used for good purposes. So when disease or destruction or death should come, we can trust him that he has all things in his hands.
- And he will work good purposes in us and through us. When our daughter Rebecca was young, I took her into a room against her will to a group of people she didn't know.
- I handed her over to them, pulled her grip from my hand, and I watched as they pushed a sharp needle into her arm.
- Screaming from fear and pain, she kept looking at me as if to say, why are you doing this to me? Make it stop. But what she didn't know and what I knew was that it was for her good.
- The pain was necessary so that they could perform surgery and insert her cochlear implant. You see, there's two ways we can see or view our suffering.
- [3 : 5 6] We can see it as a curse, an unexplained tragedy that God has no control over, that causes us misery and hardship. Or second, we can see it as a gift, a struggle or a trial, sent by God or allowed by God that is for our good and for his glory.

Now, as I say these words, I realise that it's not easy to accept, not easy to understand, yet by looking to God, we can learn to embrace and accept all things as something from our Heavenly Father, a gift from our Sovereign Father.

So over these next two weeks, starting today, we're going to be looking at ten ways God uses suffering for our good. We're going to look at four of them this morning.

Here's the first. Embracing suffering as a gift can lead to salvation. Turn with me, please, to Exodus chapter 2.

I haven't got page numbers, so if you're nearby, somebody who's struggling, just no embarrassment, just ask for the page or ask them to direct you where it is.

[5 : 27] Exodus 2. This is perhaps the first and ultimate reason for all kinds of suffering and we see this pattern throughout Scripture.

In Exodus 2, which opens up with God's people in Egypt, Exodus 2, verse 23.

During that long period, the king of Egypt died and the Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God.

God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. That covenant, that promise that he would call and bring a people to himself.

So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them. Now jump down to chapter 3, verse 7. The Lord said, I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt.

[6 : 28] I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the land of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land.

You see, their suffering, their slavery, their trial caused them to cry out to God for salvation. It's not that God was immune to their suffering or didn't know what was going on.

Rather, they came to see their need of God and cried out for his help. We see the same theme repeated in Psalm 107.

Psalm 107. This psalm gives us a picture, a number of different pictures, describes how people turn to God in their struggle for salvation.

Let me read a couple. Psalm 107 starting at verse 4. Some wandered in desert wastelands finding no way to a city where they could settle.

[7 : 41] They were hungry and thirsty and their lives ebbed away. Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble and he delivered them from their distress.

Or look at verse 10. Some sat in darkness, in utter darkness, prisoners, suffering in iron chains. Because they rebelled against God's commands and despised the plans of the Most High.

So he, that is God, subjected them to bitter labour. They stumbled and there was no one to help. Then they cried to the Lord, their God, in their trouble and he saved them from their distress.

The author C.S. Lewis knew what it was to suffer. As a young boy, his mother had died and he was neglected emotionally by his father. He suffered ill health as a teen and then when he married, he went through the grief of watching his own wife die of cancer.

And reflecting on his experiences of suffering, he said this, a well-known quote, God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pain.

[9 : 10] It is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world. You see, all suffering can be used by God to waken us up to our need of God.

That's what happened in Exodus. That's what happened in the Psalms. Let me show you one more example. Come with me, please, to Luke's Gospel, chapter 13.

Luke's Gospel, chapter 13. Luke's Gospel, Luke's Gospel, starting at verse 1.

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?

I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those 18 who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them, do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?

[10 : 28] I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you too will all perish. Now this short account tells us of two kinds of suffering.

If you look at verse 1, there was the time where Pilate, who was the Roman prefect, went and killed some Galileans. We don't have the full story, but it seems they were on their way up to the temple to make sacrifice, and Pilate intervened and wanted to remind everybody that he was boss and who was in charge and had them slaughtered.

And then in verse 4, we read about a tower, a stone tower that had fallen and killed 18 people. And all this suffering that has gone on has made people question, why all this suffering?

What's going on? Well, Jesus teaches two things through this. First, he teaches, don't assume that suffering is the result of some particular sin.

Don't assume that suffering is the result of some particular sin. Look at verse 2. He says, what about these Galileans that suffered? Do you think they were worse sinners than the others who didn't suffer in this way?

[11 : 51] I tell you, no. Or down in verse 4, what about those 18 who died? Do you think they were more guilty? And that's why the tower fell on them.

I tell you, no. Don't think that the degree of suffering is related to the degree of your sin. So if you sin little, you suffer little.

But if you sin lots, you suffer lots. That's a wrong way of thinking, says Jesus. We mustn't think that way. Instead, Jesus is wanting to teach us and show us how we should respond to the suffering we see and experience in our life.

So the second thing he teaches is repent now to escape eternal suffering. Repent now to escape eternal suffering.

So verse 3, he says, I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you too will all perish. And if we miss the point, he repeats it again in verse 5, unless you repent, you too will all perish.

[13 : 01] To perish is to face the just judgment of God for our sin. It means eternal suffering, hell itself. You see, he's showing us that we've all turned from God and we all deserve to be separated from God.

And Jesus is saying, repent now, turn to God for salvation or a worse suffering will come upon us.

You see, our temporary sufferings, the things we see going on in our world, should awaken us to the reality of an eternal suffering.

Suffering is God's megaphone to awaken, arouse, a deaf world. God takes the sufferings that we see and experience and he takes them and he uses them for good purposes to show us all that we need rescued.

Or to put it another way, God in his goodness allows temporary suffering so that we will avoid eternal suffering.

[14 : 12] suffering. So the first thing we see as to the reasons or the purposes of suffering is that it can lead to salvation.

It brings us to a place where we cry out to God for salvation. Second, it can lead us to depend to depend on God.

You see, through our suffering we come to see that we are weak and desperately need God. Have a look with me please at 2 Corinthians chapter 1.

2 Corinthians chapter 1. Verse 8.

2 Corinthians 1. Verse 8. Paul is speaking We do not want you to be uninformed brothers and sisters about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia.

[15 : 22] We were under great pressure far beyond our ability to endure so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death.

You see, Paul's experience of suffering was real. So real, he wants to curl up and die. He can't take anymore. And that's how suffering is.

Sometimes it's relentless. We long for the pain to go away and the hurts to stop. But it just keeps coming. And rather than get better, it gets worse.

But why? For what purpose? What good is there in having to go through it? Well, he tells us, look at the rest of verse 9. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.

You see, we were created as dependent people. God made us and sustains us and provides for us. We're not independent beings.

[16 : 30] we're not meant to live life without God. Joni Erickson Tada, the author of the book I mentioned, A Place of Healing, has suffered terribly in her life.

And she has often reached the place where, similar to as Paul has written, she despaired of life itself. But listen to how she sees her suffering.

Here's a quote. She says, my weakness, that is my quadriplegia, is my greatest asset because it forces me into the arms of Christ every single morning when I can't get up.

How can Joni say her suffering is her greatest asset? because Joni has come to see that embracing suffering as a gift from God has happened for good purposes.

What does it say in verse 9? This happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. What is it that you struggle with today?

[17 : 51] What is your suffering? suffering? What do you fear waking up to every morning? Well, rather than fight our suffering, the invitation is to come to God in faith, to lean upon him, to depend upon him, to ask God to help us all to say, look at the quote, my weakness, that is my, now you fill in the blank, whatever your suffering is, is my greatest asset because it forces me into the arms of Christ every single morning when I can't get up.

Embracing suffering as a gift leads us to depend on God. third, embracing suffering as a gift can stop us drifting from God.

Come with me please to Psalm 119, Psalm 119, verse 67, 67, you see, we are all born with wandering hearts and rather than turn to God, we can run from God.

So have a look at Psalm 119, verse 67, before I was afflicted I went astray but now I obey your word.

The author writes what we all experience. We can so quickly drift from God. Like sheep we wander astray and get ourselves into all kinds of trouble.

[20 : 01] We turn our backs on God and God can use the suffering that we face in our life for good purposes to bring us back to him.

Look again verse 67 before I was afflicted I went astray but now because of what has happened I obey your word.

It sounds harsh. It seems evil even cruel. It seems like a punishment from God to beat us back into line but that's not our God.

In fact the author sees it all as good for him. Look at verse 68. You are good and what you do is good.

Teach me your decrees. Verse 71 it was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.

[21 : 05] The writer to the Hebrews says the same thing. You can follow with me Hebrews chapter 12. Hebrews chapter 12 and starting in the middle of verse 5.

We'll pick it up on the quote from verse 5. He says my son do not make light of the Lord's discipline and do not lose heart when he rebukes you because the Lord disciplines the one he loves and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.

Down to verse 10. See here he's speaking about our earthly human fathers. He says they disciplined us for a while as they thought best but in contrast God disciplines us for our good in order that we may share in his holiness.

No discipline seems pleasant at the time but painful. Later on however it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who've been trained by it.

John Piper put it like this suffering is designed to destroy the appetite for sin. God in his goodness he allows and permits all kinds of struggle so that we deal with the sin in our life so that we become more like him.

[23 : 01] And as we said it doesn't mean that our degree of suffering is related to the degree of our sin. So if I'm suffering lots then I have more sin to deal with. That's not how we are to see it.

Rather that when things happen as we go through our trial, as we go through our struggle it gives us opportunity to examine our hearts and put to death the sin that breaks us and entangles us.

So third embracing suffering as a gift from God can stop us from drifting from God. And then fourth embracing suffering as a gift from God can lead to spiritual renewal.

2 Corinthians chapter 4 2 Corinthians chapter 4 chapter 4 You see it's God's design and plan to use suffering to keep us close to himself and to change us for glory.

2 Corinthians 4 verse 16 Therefore we do not lose heart though outwardly we are wasting away yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day for our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

[24 : 48] Paul's experience again is our experience isn't it? Look at verse 16 He says we are wasting away every day through the sufferings we face our bodies our lives are breaking down cancer destroys arthritis weakens eyes fail our hearing goes our ability to remember is lost and when we suffer when we experience this wasting away we lose heart don't we?

We want to give up we live in hopeless despair like Raphael Samuel that we quoted at the beginning this wasting away it's all pointless there's nothing to this suffering but verse 16 he says therefore we do not lose heart why does he not lose heart how can he have hope in the midst of suffering well let's read verse 16 again we do not lose heart though outwardly we are wasting away yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day you see for the Christian there are two processes happening at once there's wasting and there's renewal but the point is they're connected to one another the wasting of our lives leads to the renewal of our lives the suffering that we go through leads to glory look at verse 17 for our light and momentary troubles this wasting away that we experience is not for nothing it is achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all our hurts our pains all our wasting away is all taken by God and is used for our daily renewal in the gym where I go on the wall is this great big sign it says the pain you feel today is the strength you feel tomorrow in other words the suffering of a workout leads to a greater renewing and I think that's what's going on here every day he says every moment of pain every minute of hurt that we experience is taken by God and used by God to renew us to strengthen us so that we are kept for glory in our suffering we are faced we're confronted with our powerlessness our inabilities and it moves us back to

God who renews us and fills us with all that we need for that moment so in our suffering we do not lose heart our sufferings are not hopeless meaningless or pointless God in his sovereignty takes them and he uses them for good renewing us spiritually day by day so forth embracing suffering as a gift can lead to spiritual renewal suffering is never easy we have many questions as to why yet as we see through his word God takes the worst of things not that those things are good in and of themselves but

God takes the worst of things that can ever happen and uses them he transforms them for good purposes in our life remember the verse we quoted at the beginning Romans 8 verse 28 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 experience of life God works for our good through our suffering he can use it to save us as we call out to him and cry to him for help he uses it to cause us to depend upon him to lean upon him he uses it to stop us from drifting from him into further trouble and away from our relationship with him and he uses our suffering to strengthen us and renew us to keep us to keep us close to himself so that he will bring us to glory away

I don't know why God doesn't remove all the suffering but I can see that God uses our trials and struggles to keep us close to himself so that we will be with him may God give us strength to follow what he says and to embrace the things that are the most difficult in our life and to see them as good let's pray