

WHY GOD ALLOWS HIS CHILDREN TO SUFFER

Many people can't reconcile the idea of a loving God along with the reality of suffering. Some suffering is simply the result of living with the consequences of a creation that has been cursed by God. Since our human body is part of creation, we are all subject to pain and suffering and ultimately, death. This is not God's fault, but came about because of the introduction of sin by our fore parents, Adam and Eve.

There are other reasons why God's children suffer and as we go through some of them, I hope you will see that none of them demonstrate a lack of love on the Lord's part.

Chastening

The first cause of suffering I would like to cover is chastening. Hebrews 12:5,6 say, "My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him: For whom the Lord loves He chastens and scourges every son whom He receives."

Once a person trusts Christ as his Savior, he is born into the family of God. And the Lord has commanded His children to live according to the guidelines set down in the Scriptures. But because we are naturally self willed, we can choose to disobey the Lord and if we do, He then must take measures in our lives to try and bring about the desired results.

For instance, let's say you had a small child who would run into the road every time he was outside. You would have to discipline him in order to make him obey you. If you spanked him, would it be because you didn't love him? Of course not, it's because you do love him that you spank him. In the spiritual realm, God disciplines us by bringing things into our lives to try to make us obey Him and the motive behind His chastening is love (Hebrews 12:6).

And what kind of measures does God take to try and change the behavior of His children? I Corinthians 11:30 says, "For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep." There were a number of Christians in the congregation in Corinth who were guilty of getting drunk at the Lord's Supper and because of this sin, the Lord chastened them. Some became weak, others sickly,

while yet others experienced a premature death. It is interesting to note that the same sin resulted in different consequences for different people. The obvious reason being that God holds some people more responsible than others.

If a man had three sons born 5 years apart, who had all committed the same sin, he would certainly hold his eldest son the most responsible and thus the one worthy of the most severe punishment. The more a person knows about the Bible the more God holds that person responsible. Thus it was a greater sin for the knowledgeable believers at Corinth to get drunk at the Lord's Supper than the less knowledgeable and this explains why there were different consequences for the same sin.

The Lord uses other measures besides physical ones to influence His children to change their behavior. In Ephesians 4:30, it says, "And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption." Every person who trusts Christ as his Savior is given the Holy Spirit as a permanent possession. When a person is being obedient to God as a habit of life, the Holy Spirit will be producing good feelings within that person. Galatians 5:22 says, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace..." This is none other than the love, joy and peace of God, Himself, produced within and experienced by the obedient child of God. But just as God can produce good feelings within an obedient believer, He can also produce a Divine depression within the disobedient believer. That is what it means to grieve the Holy Spirit. Unconfessed and unforsaken sin hurts God's feelings because the erring believer is choosing sin over God in his life. And because God dwells within His children, the feelings God are experiencing will be felt by the believer. This is why the very happiest people on the face of the earth are servants of the Lord and the most miserable are those children of God who are fighting and resisting their Heavenly Father.

God knows what is best for us and wants what is best for us. But the only way we can have God's best is by being obedient to His commands. So if chastening is what it takes to make us obedient, then we should respond with thankfulness knowing that obedience to God is the only road to having an abundant life.

Chastening is never God's way of getting back at us, it is simply the heavenly promptings from the hand of a loving Father. And because the motivation behind chastening is to convince the wayward child to change his ways, chastening can be avoided. How? I Corinthians 11:31,32 tell us. They say, "For if we would judge

ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world.” If there is something you are doing that you know is wrong, and you judge yourself and stop committing that particular sin, then you can avoid whatever it was that God had intended to bring into your life as chastening. Why is that? Because God chastens us so that we will stop whatever behavior it is that is wrong, and if we stop that behavior ourselves, then there is no longer any reason for us to be chastened.

If you don’t stop whatever it is you are doing wrong, then the Lord is forced to bring suffering into your life. But any suffering we go through because of chastening is God’s way of encouraging us to live lives satisfying to Him and to ourselves. Because chastening can be avoided, we can have the assurance that if we have made the necessary changes in our lives, any suffering experienced will not be because of chastening but for one of the other reasons which we will be covering.

Another reason that believers are chastened is for the benefit of those looking on. One example of this is given in II Samuel 12. King David committed adultery with a woman and fathered a child by her. The woman was Bathsheba, and at the time, her husband Uriah was at war. King David sent for Uriah so that he would come home, and it would look as if Uriah had fathered the child. Uriah wouldn’t go near his wife though, so David devised a plan for Uriah to be killed. This amounted to premeditated murder, and of course, the Lord didn’t condone that.

David suffered some serious consequences as a direct result of these sins. You can read about it in II Samuel 12:7-14. The point I want to bring up though, is that David’s baby died so that onlookers could see that God didn’t condone David’s behavior. II Samuel 12:14 says, “Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child that is born unto thee shall surely die.” You can just imagine David’s enemies saying, “That’s the kind of person God would pick and call the apple of His eye?! Some God He must be!”

Our testimony for the Lord is often crucial when it comes to other people’s believing the Gospel. So when necessary, the Lord takes measures to show that He disapproves of His children’s behavior.

If you are talking to people about the Lord, then you can be sure that they will be looking at your life. And if they see you going against the Lord's rules, they aren't going to give much credence to what you say.

Pruning

Another reason that believers suffer is found in John 15:1,2, which say, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in Me that bears not fruit He takes away: and every branch that bears fruit, He purges it, that it may bring forth more fruit." In this passage the Lord is comparing His children to branches on a vine. The unproductive branches are the ones He removes from the vine. These branches are unproductive in the sense that they aren't bearing fruit. They are still branches; however, because they are unproductive, God takes them out of a place of service. He is not using them in His service because they are not living dedicated lives for Him.

Every Christian has a choice to make concerning whether or not he will serve the Lord. Making this decision has no effect on one's eternal destiny because serving the Lord has nothing to do with going to heaven. Serving the Lord involves a life of good works, but going to heaven involves no works. Romans 4:5 says, "But to him that works not, but believeth on Him that justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness."

But when Paul wrote to those who already had put their faith in Christ, he said, "I beseech you therefore, brethren by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (Romans 12:1). The choice to serve God is up to the Christian, and although it has nothing to do with where he will spend eternity, (that is settled because he believed in Christ), it has everything to do with how happy he will be here on earth and how many rewards he will receive in heaven. Let me give you an illustration.

Suppose a father who had twin sons were to offer both of them jobs in his store with the guarantee that if they did a good job, they would end up being partners with him. And let's say one son were to accept and the other were to decline. Now the one who accepted would be the one receiving criticism for making mistakes on the job, but he would also be the one receiving training on how to run the whole business. On the surface it would appear that the son who rejected his father's offer

would have life a lot easier since his life wouldn't demand discipline and following a bunch of rules; but in reality, the young man who worked for his dad would be the one who would be receiving the benefits. He would be the one bringing home a paycheck every week, and he would be the one investing his life for the future. At the same time he would also be getting to know his father in ways he had never known him before.

In this same sense, God has called all of His children to become workers together with Him. You can refuse though, as the one son did, and thereby place yourself in the position of not being dealt with in the same manner as the child of God who does decide to serve the Lord. You can be the branch that bears no fruit and it is true that the Lord won't be putting you through a purging process, but at the same time, you won't be enjoying any of the benefits that come along with serving the Lord either. It is only the son who chose to work who receives a paycheck from his father, and it is only the child of God who works for the Lord who will receive rewards from His Heavenly Father.

John 15 mentions two specific rewards that a believer will receive for serving God. John 15:7 promises answered prayer and John 15:11 promises a joy no less than the joy Jesus Christ has. So although the believer who decides not to serve the Lord won't be purged, he will miss out on the very best life possible and on having rewards in heaven.

It is only the believer who does decide to serve the Lord who will go through the purging or pruning process mentioned in John 15:2 because it is by that process that an obedient Christian is fitted for better service. Just like a tree is pruned so that it will be more productive, the believer that serves God will be pruned so that he will be more productive for the Lord.

There are two ways that this pruning can be done. One way is by your doing it, and the other is by God's doing it. First, I'll explain how you can prune yourself. John 15:3 says, "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you." The word "clean" is the same word that was translated "purged" in verse two. Christ is saying that they were "purged" or "pruned" through the words He had spoken to them. Psalm 119:9 says something similar, "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto according to Thy Word."

You can prune or take things out of your life by merely obeying the Scriptures. If there is something in your life that shouldn't be there, you can simplify the pruning process by changing whatever it is yourself. Sometimes though, it is necessary for the Lord to do some of the pruning. And His purging process is often not the most comfortable thing to have to go through, but it is necessary if we are to yield our maximum output. Remember, He said, "every branch that bears fruit, He purges it, that it may bring forth more fruit."

I'll give you an example of a pruning that I know of. There was a young man that had dedicated his life to the Lord, and he was a guitar player. He had made plans to play in a bar with a group of friends, even though he knew better than to do that. The day before he was to go, he cut his finger, and so he wasn't able to play the guitar. There was no doubt in his or anyone else's mind as to why it happened. He had refused to take something out of his life, so the Lord had to prune it for him. Please understand that I am not saying that it was wrong for him to play the guitar; it is where he was going to play it that was wrong.

So again, we see the Lord's bringing suffering into our lives for our benefit and because He loves us. In this case however, our suffering is also benefiting others. I'll explain. He said that the purging is so that we will bear more fruit; that fruit is other people.

In John 15:16, Christ said, "Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain..." The believer is commanded to go and bring forth fruit. Just like an apple tree produces apples, a believer is to be producing other believers. And how does he do this? He does this by telling others how they can know they have eternal life. Christ said, in Mark 16:15, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature."

So whatever the Lord has to bring into our lives to make us more productive, it is worth it, especially when you realize that more people will be in heaven because of it.

Trials

Trials is another reason why God's children suffer. As a matter of fact, God not only allows trials to come into a believer's life, He arranges them for various

reasons. For instance, in Deuteronomy 8:2,3, Moses was reminding the children of Israel concerning the things that had happened to them while they were in the wilderness for forty years. It says, “And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God led you these forty years in the wilderness to humble you, and to prove you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments, or not. And he humbled you, and allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna, which you knew not, neither did your fathers know; that He might make you know that man does not live by bread only, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord does man live.’

After the children of Israel had just been delivered from the hands of the Egyptians by the Lord’s opening the Red Sea for them to walk through on dry land, and after that same Red Sea had drowned the Egyptian army, Israel learned to put her trust in the Lord. Concerning this it says, in Exodus 14:31, “And Israel saw that great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians: and the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord, and His servant Moses.”

Sounds wonderful doesn’t it finally after having seen the Lord’s deliverance, the children of Israel believed that the Lord could take care of them. Unfortunately, it was only as long as they didn’t have any problems that they trusted the Lord. It was just three days later that the Lord tested these same people who had witnessed all these mighty miracles and who had finally believed His power. He put them in a situation where they had no water to drink.

Exodus 15:22-24 read, “So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur, and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water, and when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah for they were bitter... and the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink?” Three days, and the people had already forgotten how much the Lord had done for them. God purposely allowed them to be in a situation where there was no water to drink to see how they would react and to see what they were really made of. It was this instance that brought out their lack of trust in the Lord.

God is looking for people whose hearts are perfect toward Him. II Chronicles 16:9 says, “For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward Him.” God is looking for people who will serve Him no matter what obstacles face them. And

actually the problems that arise separate the believers who really do mean business about serving the Lord from those believers who really aren't committed.

There was a man who joined the Air Force in World War II. While in training, he and the other men had to run ten miles every morning. One morning one of the men dropped dead from a heart attack while running. The rest of the men blamed the officer in charge for the man's death because they thought he was pushing them too hard. That night the officer got all the men out of bed and explained that the purpose of that training camp was to determine which men could take the rigors of war and which ones weren't fit. Someday those men would be flying bombers with other men aboard, and if the man who died hadn't been discovered by that exercise, as tragic as it was, it could have been much more tragic because it may have meant the lives of a lot of men. He could have been flying a plane when it happened. The point is the man already had the weakness in his heart, and it took the testing of the training camp to expose it.

Another reason for testing is to bring about patience in our lives. The word "patience" means, "to abide under." When we abide under our trials in a God honoring fashion, then we have patience. This means that when trials come into our lives, we are willing to learn the lesson that God has to teach us.

Let's look at the letter of James to see what he has to say about patience. In James 1:2, it says, "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations." First of all, notice that James says to count it all joy "when," not "if," but "when" ye fall into different trials. Trials will come, and our reaction is to be one of joy.

And how can someone have joy over the fact that he is in a car accident for instance? Well as we'll see, he doesn't have to rejoice over the car accident, just over the fact that God can use even this situation for his good. James 1:3 explains, "Knowing this, that the trying of your faith works ('brings about') patience." Trials can produce patience in your life if you respond correctly to them, so that is your basis of joy. You may be lying on a sick bed right now and you aren't joyful that you are in pain, but you can be joyful that your pain is not meaningless. If you are a servant of Jesus Christ, you can have the confidence that all things are working together for good for you (Romans 8:28). Any difficulty or pain you experience is for a purpose and is allowed by the loving hand of God.

And if the purpose of your suffering is to bring about patience in your life, please listen to the encouragement of James. He says, in James 1:4, “But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire wanting nothing.” When it says to let patience have her perfect work, it means to let patience have its full effect. And the full effect which God is trying to bring about is the maturity of the believer. God wants us to be “perfect and entire, lacking nothing.” The word “perfect” means “complete,” and the word “entire” means “faultless, blameless.” God longs for His children to be developed into spiritual Christians.

In James 5:10,11, James further encourages believers to respond correctly under pressure. He says, “Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience. Behold we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.”

I have known people who turned against the Lord when tragedy struck, but I personally don’t know anyone who has experienced as much tragedy as Job. He lost all his children and all his wealth in one day. And what was Job’s response? He said, in Job 1:21, “Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither. The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” Job didn’t understand why the Lord had allowed his children and wealth to be taken away, but he knew that the Lord must have had a purpose. In Job 13:15, he said, “Though He slay me,” (and remember this is s after he was given a disease over his entire body,) “yet will I trust in Him.”

And in Job 23:10, he said, “But He knows the way that I should take: when He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold.” Job considered his trials to be a purifying process. Just as unrefined gold is heated to purge it of its impurities, God puts the heat on in a person’s life to purify it.

Also remember that after a test has accomplished its purpose, then come the blessings. In the case of Job, the Lord gave him twice as much of what he had in the first place.

So if you are going through some rough times, have confidence in the Lord that He knows what He is doing. And if you are being obedient, (because the obedient child is the one who loves His heavenly Father,) then remember Romans 8:28 is

still in the Bible. It says, “And we know all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.”

Bringing Glory to God

The last reason I want to cover concerning why God’s children suffer is that our suffering can be used to bring glory to God.

Some people present God as Someone Who is just waiting to bestow physical health and financial prosperity upon His children. And so any suffering on the part of the child of God is considered evidence of something spiritually wrong with him.

Those notions can quickly be dispelled by one’s simply opening up the Bible and looking at one of God’s greatest servants, the apostle Paul. When it came to faithfulness, he surpassed all his contemporaries (I Corinthians 15:10), yet he lacked both physical health and financial prosperity. In I Corinthians 4:11, concerning his financial status, he wrote, “Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling place.” Concerning his physical condition, he wrote, “Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the Gospel unto you at the first. And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected” (Galatians 4:13,14a).

If you were to look at a person who had it made as far as the world is concerned, the happiness that person experienced could be explained on the basis of what that person had. But what if a person did not have it made, and not only that, but what if he were living a life deprived of physical comforts and at the same time were suffering some sort of physical ailment if that person had a peace and a joy, how would you explain it? The obvious answer is that there would be no “human” explanation.

Paul, in his letter to the Philippian believers, was telling them how they too could experience a peace that passed understanding, a peace that had absolutely nothing to do with one’s circumstances, a peace that came from God Himself. The proof that what Paul was saying was true was Paul himself. At the time he wrote this letter, he was poor and in prison, yet the Philippians had seen for themselves the

qualities he exhibited. There was no other explanation for his peace and contentment than what God, Himself produced through him.

In another of Paul's letters he told the believers about a physical ailment the Lord had given him and he explained the Lord's wisdom behind his condition. You see, Paul had been allowed by the Lord to visit heaven and the Lord feared Paul would become proud over this great experience so He gave him a physical affliction to keep him humble. It says, in II Corinthians 12:7, "And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure." So one of Satan's messengers caused Paul to suffer physically.

When this happened Paul prayed to the Lord three times to relieve this infirmity (II Corinthians 12:8). The Lord's response to Paul's prayer is recorded in II Corinthians 12:9. He said, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness." The Lord was letting Paul know that He was going to give Paul whatever he needed to undergo his sufferings. The Lord told Paul that he would be of greater usefulness to Him if he were weak because that way, all would know that any strength manifested by Paul was Divine, not human, thus God would be receiving the glory, not Paul.

And what was Paul's response when the Lord told him this? He said, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in mine infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (II Corinthians 12:9). If God's power could be exhibited in a greater way through Paul because of his physical weakness, then that is exactly what Paul wanted.

And when Paul looked at all the suffering he went through for the cause of Christ, he didn't think it was even worthy of being compared to what God had in store for him in the future. He wrote, "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). As a matter of fact, Paul looked at all he went through as but a "light affliction" and he knew his light affliction was going to result in eternal dividends. He wrote, in II Corinthians 4:17, "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

In conclusion, I hope you have clearly seen that there is a purpose behind all the sufferings experienced by the child of God. Rather than being discouraged amidst suffering, I hope you will learn to draw strength and encouragement from “the God of all comfort; Who comforts us in all our tribulation” (II Corinthians 1:3,4).