

# Why do Christians Suffer, Part 1

Our study is about why do we suffer. I want to start by talking about myself. Recently I had knee surgery; it was a meniscus surgery on my left knee. I remember the morning that I went in for my surgery. I went up to the third floor of the building. There was a receptionist there and she began to take my name, my birth date, and other information to make sure that I was the right person who was scheduled for the surgery. Then I had to take a seat and wait.

Eventually the nurse called me and I remember that I went through the same routine; what is your name? Where was the surgery going to be? I told her it was my left knee. I could tell that she was happy with that answer.

Then she asked about my pain tolerance. "What's your pain tolerance on a scale from zero to 10?" I had to stop and think. I was not sure how to respond. I think I told her four to five. I am not really sure, but somewhere in there. I thought it was kind of interesting. She wanted to know the degree of my suffering. I was thinking, "How does this connect with my surgery?"

I found the answer after the surgery. They asked me again, "How is your knee feeling?" I am thinking, "My knee is feeling great." It was anesthetized. I was feeling really good. But when I got to the doctor for my follow-up appointment, they asked me the same question.

I figured out what they were doing was trying to get a before and after surgery comparison to see how I did. I thought it was interesting that they asked that question. So I have a question for you this morning, and my question is on a scale of one to 10, how is your suffering? I do not mean

how is your knee doing, I am asking, "How is your life? What is your suffering like on a scale of one to 10?"

Some of us would probably answer that our number is high. Some of us would answer that the number is low. I suspect all of us would say at some point the number was high. The other question I want to ask you is what do you do when your pain is high?

Most of us, maybe all of us, anesthetize our pain when the pain is high. We do something to reduce our pain. Some of us use food. We find something fun, something enjoyable to help us through our pain. For some of us, we drink something, maybe alcohol. For some of us it might be grape juice. For some of us, it is an activity. You get busy. You do something, get preoccupied to get your mind off your

pain. Does that sound familiar? Some of us pursue significance. Some of us cannot be alone. We have to have a relationship. We have to be with somebody. For some of us, it is TV. For some of us, it is the Super Bowl.

I have to say that some of us actually enjoy conflict with other people because that helps us ignore our conflict inside. What do you do? How do you anesthetize your own pain? We all do it. I am going

to tell you that everybody here does it. The sad truth we discovered in our last study in Ecclesiastes 4 is that oppression exists in the world and there is suffering in life. We just block it out.

One of the ways we block it out is by anesthetizing ourselves by the things we do. We have gotten used to our pain. The reason we have gotten used to our pain is because we have been anesthetizing our pain for so long that we now ignore most of our pain. We do things that help us ignore



our pain.

**WHAT IS THE ROOT CAUSE OF SUFFERING?** My question is what do you do? How do you cope with your pain? In our study I want to talk about suffering. Therefore, I have two questions; the first question is what is the root cause to suffering? The second question is why does suffering exist? Why do we suffer?

The answer is that the root cause of suffering and the reason we suffer is sin. I want to take you back to the Garden of Eden. I want to give you a simple proof that suffering is due to sin and that sin is the root cause. The simple proof I want to give you can be found in the Garden of Eden. Do you remember the story of Adam and Eve? That account appears in Genesis 2 and 3.

We are told in both chapters that Adam and Eve were living in the Garden of Eden. If you read the passage, you discover the Garden of Eden was an incredible place that God had created. It was a beautiful place with rivers and mist. For those of you who do not like rain, there was no rain. There was just mist that rose up from the ground.

We can gather that there was incredible fruit of all kinds, but there was one fruit that God had told them they could not eat. There was only one thing that they could not do in life. Isn't that just amazing to think about? There was only one restriction, and they could not keep themselves from respecting that one restriction. Eve disobeyed God by eating of the forbidden fruit. She looked at the fruit, saw that it was really good, and ate of it.

Somehow, she could look at it, tell that it would be great to eat, would make her wise, and so she ate it. Then Adam followed. He disobeyed too! God had warned them that the result of eating the fruit would be death. Then in Genesis 3, God pronounced a curse on them as a result of their disobedience. God had warned them that this would happen.

In the earlier part of the chapter, God came searching for them and they hid themselves. It becomes obvious that they knew they had sinned. They recognized the sound of God walking in the garden. I believe this is an account of a theophany of God walking through the garden. That would imply that they were used to God visiting them. They had an ongoing relationship with God which is not going to con-

tinue in the same way.

In verse 16, we learn the consequences of their sin. The woman was told she would have children; but in the process of having children, she would encounter great pain. We are also told that she would have a desire for her husband. Some people say, "Oh, that is really wonderful. She would be in love and she would want her husband." No, that is not the meaning of the Hebrew word. The Hebrew word is used again in Genesis 4:7 to refer to wanting control.

The curse resulted in her wanting to control or dominate her husband. The curse on the human race is that women want to dominate their husbands. Now notice the last part of the curse. The verse says,

**And he will rule over you, so he will end up ruling you. Genesis 3:16 (NASB)**

The result of the curse meant that there would be conflict in marriage between a husband and wife. I do not mean to say this so that husbands and wives have someone to blame. They have only themselves to blame. This passage tells us that you can expect conflict in marriage. Verse 17. Then we are told that God pronounced a curse on the ground. God told Adam that, "In toil you will eat of it all the days of your life, and both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you, and you will eat the plants of the field."

So, the message is you will work and your work will be toilsome. Work will become hard and difficult. Think about it for a second. That means that originally work in the Garden of Eden must have been fun. When they worked, it was a thrill. When they worked, it was enjoyable. What a different place.

As a result of sin, pain comes in childbirth, conflict occurs in marriage and work becomes difficult. There are thorns and thistles as a result of sin. Verse 19 says, "By the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread 'till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you will return." That is the result of sin.

So what does Genesis 3 tell us was the result of Adam and Eve's sin? A lot of pain and suffering; that is the result of sin! The root cause of suffering is what? Sin. The diagnosis for

your suffering is sin. If you go to verse 24, you find out that God drives Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden. As a result of sin, they cannot stay in the garden. When you get to chapter 4, you find out that murder occurs. You find out that there is anger. The first murder occurs in chapter 4 following Adam and Eve's sin, and then hatred flourishes. That occurs in verse 23 of chapter 4. Then there is another murder - revenge and murder. If you just keep on going from chapter to chapter to chapter, you will discover one sin after another sin after another sin is a result of what Adam and Eve did.

The message is that sin occurred and suffering started. Please note that God did not abandon us. God did not leave us. The reason we have suffering is not because God left us. The reason we have suffering is because we left Him. The reason we have suffering in life is because we abandoned God. We chose to disobey. Adam and Eve chose to disobey. And yet, interestingly enough, God uses that very thing, suffering, to do a work in our life.

**GOD USES SUFFERING TO REVEAL TRUE CHRISTIANS.** So, the root cause of suffering is sin. That is why suffering exists, and the second question for our study is how does God use suffering? We have answered the question why does suffering exist? So, the question now is how does God use suffering in our life?

We are going to look at six different ways that God uses suffering. In this study, we are only going to look at three of them, and we will look at three more in our next study. The first way that God uses suffering is to test our faith. Let me change the words. God uses suffering to prove whether or not you are a Christian. God uses suffering to reveal to us whether or not someone is a Christian. Maybe that some-

body is you.

It is really common for me as a pastor to have people come and say, "Well, I know someone who went to church. They sang praises to God. They believed in Jesus Christ. They said that Jesus was their Lord and their Savior. They are no longer going to church, but I am absolutely confident that they are a Christian. They are going to be in heaven someday."

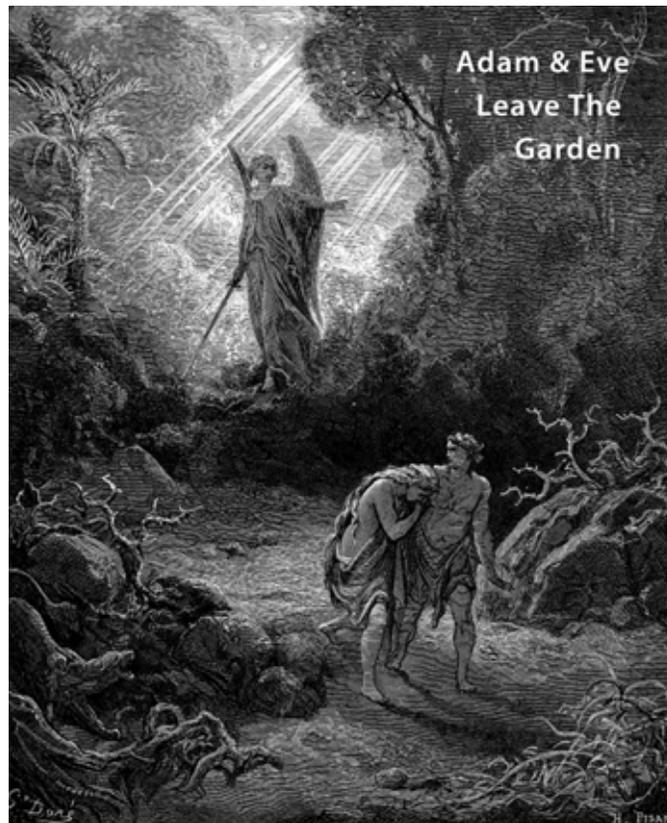
The first way that God uses suffering is to demonstrate whether or not a person is a Christian. I want to show you how this works. Turn to Matthew 13:18. We are going to discover how God uses suffering to demonstrate if a person is a Christian or not.

In Matthew 13:18 there is a parable of the sower of the seed. The header in some of your Bibles might read differently, but it is a parable. There are three ingredients to this parable. The first ingredient is a sower. There is some seed that was sown. I think we understand the idea of a sower. The sower has some seed and he is just throwing it. He is scattering the seed. Jesus speaks here of four

kinds of soils. I think most of us are aware that if a seed lands on good soil versus soil that contains a bunch of rock or asphalt and you put water on it, the seed on the asphalt might germinate a little bit, but it is not going to last for long.

So there are four kinds of soil and Jesus wants to make a point. Verse 18 says in the Parable of The Sower,

**When anyone hears the word of the Kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road. Matthew 13:18 (NASB)**



**FIRST SOIL – SOIL NEVER RECEIVES ANY SEED.** So, the first soil is soil that is beside the road. The picture is of the sower casting seeds and some of it lands beside the road. The question is, what happens to that seed? Now these four soils are symbols of four different kinds of people. We are told in this case that the evil one, that would be the devil or Satan, snatches the seed away. The Greek word just means he grabs it. He grabs the seed away so the person did not hear the word and believe it. The idea is that the Word of God is given out. The devil comes along and snatches it away so that the person does not hear the Word of God and believe. You can check that out in Luke 8, a parallel passage that talks about the same parable.

In verses 20 and 21, there is another kind of soil. This soil is rocky soil. We are told,

*The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no firm root in himself but is only temporary. When affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately, he falls away. Matthew 13:20-21 (NASB)*

**SECOND SOIL – SOIL WITH ROCKS.** This soil is rocky soil. It has rocks all through it. This is another symbol of a second type of person. This person actually hears the gospel. They actually hear the Bible or the Word of God. We are told that he or she receives it with joy. That is, he understands it to some degree. He or she gets really excited, but then bad news occurs. Verse 21 states there is no firm root. So, they start to grow, but the roots never sink down into the ground. Right away we know this is bad news. Then we are told that they are only temporary. The message is they were not real Christians. Look at the verse for one of the other proofs that he or she was not a real Christian. It says when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away. This person is persecuted because he or she profess to be a Christian. Maybe they even tell somebody they are a Christian. They act like they are a Christian, and then they get persecuted. Then they are gone. They leave. They are “done with that thing.” I am not going back to that church. I am through with that Jesus. I am through with

Christianity. I am looking for another god. I am looking for another religion. I think that is like one of my neighbors who became disenchanted with Christianity and is now looking for another god. He is looking for his own kind of god. They shop for their own god. They design their own god and worship him.

**THIRD SOIL – SOIL WITH THISTLES.** Verse 22 gives us a third soil. This soil has a bunch of thistles in it or a bunch of thorns. We are told he or she is,

*And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns . . . Matthew 13:22 (NASB)*

I was thinking of blackberry thorns or cactus thorns here in the desert. This represents a person who hears the word.

Only the first soil symbolizes someone who did not hear the word. The second soil symbolizes somebody who hears it and gets excited. That means they understand it to some degree. The third soil hears the word too, but then we are told,

*. . . the worry of the world, and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. Matthew 13:22 (NASB)*

That is, they do not grow. They start to germinate and maybe grow just a little bit, but it does not last. Now, I want you to notice what the problem is with this person. This person leaves the faith. They leave the church. They give up Christ because of the worries and struggles of the world. The worry of the world is an interesting Greek word. It has the idea of feeling.

I want you to re-read what I just wrote. It has the idea of feelings of depression, feelings of anxiety and feelings of concern. They are struggling emotionally. This person has problems, and then we are told, "and deceitfulness of wealth." That is, they are after money or the wealth of the world influences them. So either because they are just so distraught with their suffering, or the wealth of the world, they leave the faith. They leave God.

How does God use suffering? This third soil reveals that God uses suffering to motivate those who are not really

Christians to leave. He uses suffering to demonstrate who are real Christians and who are not real.

**FOURTH SOIL – GOOD SOIL.** Verse 23 is about the fourth soil. It is the last one. He says,

*And the one on whom soil was sown on good soil, this is the man who hears the word, and understands it, and bears fruit, and brings forth some a hundredfold and some sixty and some thirty. Matthew 13:23 (NASB)*

This person grows and they grow and they grow and they grow. Some Christians produce a lot and some Christians do not produce a lot, but they are still a Christian. Are you with me? In other words, the real Christian hears the word of God and they respond and wow, do they grow and they stay. They do not leave the faith. They are a permanent plant producing fruit.

My wife and I planted an orange tree on our property. We wondered during the first years if this tree was any good. There was no fruit. But just recently, the tree started producing real fruit. That was really exciting.

That tree is real; it is a real orange tree. There are people in the church who are not real Christians. In fact, there is a parable in verse 36 of chapter 13 that talks about tares.

We have talked about tares before. The difficulty with the tares is that they look like Christians. They look like the real thing, but they are not. That is the whole point of the parable. The point is that the tares look just like the wheat. You cannot tell them apart. Morally, they behave like Christians. They use the same Christian words. They just look like Christians. Then Jesus explains to the disciples that the only one who really knows who is a Christian is God, but you and

I will not know until the end of time. Do you realize what that means? It means there are tares in our churches. That means there are people who are not really Christians in the church.

This means that God uses suffering to demonstrate who is real and who is not. Some people leave and some stay. But some people who are not Christians stay. Not all of them leave. Otherwise, the parable of the tares would not be a good parable. In Luke 8:15, we read this about the good soil. It says,

*But the seed and the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart. Luke 8:15 (NASB)*

What did they do? They held fast and they produced fruit with perseverance. The idea is that they produced fruit even while they were suffering. Even in difficult times they continued.

In James 1:2-3, we read this.

*Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your*

*faith produces endurance. James 1:2-3 (NASB)*

Do you know what this passage is saying? It says that God uses suffering to test your faith. In 1 Corinthians 15:2, Paul talks about faith. He uses a very interesting phrase. He is talking to the Corinthians and he tells them that he has presented the gospel. He has told them how to become a Christian. Then at the very end of the verse, he says, "Unless you have believed in vain." Do you know what Paul reveals? Paul reveals that there are people who believe; and then there are people who believe but do not have real faith. He calls it



vain faith, empty faith. That means it is not real faith. They do not have saving faith. Vain faith is not faith that takes you to Heaven. Vain faith is faith that will end up taking you to hell.

So, how does God use suffering? God uses suffering to reveal who is a real Christian and who is not real. We encounter various trials, suffering and testing. These times of suffering reveal what your faith is like – real or vain!

How about this verse? 1 John 2:19 says this,

**They went out from us, but they were not really of us . . . 1 John 2:19 (NASB)**

That is sad. "They went out from us, but they really were not of us." This is somebody who came to church, perhaps even for awhile and then left. They claimed they were a Christian and later on acknowledged, "Oh, I am not a Christian."

**For if they had been of us, they would have remained with us, but they went out so that it would be shown that they were not all of us. 1 John 2:19 (NASB)**

The message is that not everybody is what they appear to be. So, how does God use suffering? One way that God uses suffering is to demonstrate who is a Christian and who is not a Christian. It is like taking a piece of ore to an assayer. He evaluates it to determine whether or not it is real gold or fool's gold. How many of you have ever bought some gold only later to find out that it was really fool's gold? It was not real gold. I did that on one occasion. I was in a store and had a really small stone I thought was a piece of gold. I was talking to the store owner about it and he said, "Oh no, that is fool's gold. That is not the real stuff." That is what we are talking about. Real stuff versus fool's gold.

**GOD USES SUFFERING TO DISCIPLINE CHRISTIANS.** The second way that God uses suffering is to discipline a sinning Christian. I call this the ER time. This is a true Christian. A true Christian is one who recognizes that they have sinned. A true Christian is one who recognizes that Jesus is God and died on a cross to forgive them of their sins. They believe that He came back to life. They want Him to forgive

their sins and they turn their life over to God. That is a real Christian.

If a real Christian sins and they continue in a pattern of sin, at some point God will bring suffering into their life to motivate them to stop sinning. That is the ER time. That is when God puts you into the emergency room. You end up going through a period of suffering and perhaps even severe suffering. It depends upon your commitment to your sin.

This reminds me of Hebrews 12. Turn to Hebrews 12. I want you to see how God deals with Christians who continue in sin. Hebrews 12:7. Verse 7 says,

**It is for discipline that you endure. God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? Hebrews 12:7 (NASB)**

The verse is simple. It says that a real Christian will endure in the discipline. Notice the word endure. That is, the Christian endures. Then we are told that God deals with you as with sons. The writer of Hebrews is talking to Christians. Some in this church might not actually be Christians. That is one of the issues in the Book of Hebrews. The writer is talking to true Christians and some who might not be true Christians.

So, he says, "God deals with you as with sons, for what son is there whom his father does not discipline." I do not know if you have had children. Some of you couples might not yet have children. But those of us who have sons and daughters have had the experience of children who did not obey.

I remember our very first daughter. I was surprised as a parent to see that she knew how to sin on her own. I mean, that was amazing to realize the fallen nature was right there in her. So, what did we do? Well, we disciplined our daughter. Some of you discipline your children. That is what is being described here. The discipline of a son. It could be the discipline of a daughter, but the message here is that we are disciplined by God as sons or daughters. Christians belong to God's family, and God deals with us as with sons because we are part of His family.

Verse 8,

**But if you are without discipline of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children, not sons. Hebrews 12:8 (NASB)**

The message is that if you are a real Christian and you are committing sin, maybe one serious sin or perhaps a pattern of different sins, you better stop. You might think you are getting away with it, and so it is not an issue. But be warned, disaster will come your way suddenly. Suffering may be coming your way.

That is what is being described in verse 8. The message is that if you truly belong to Him, God is going to discipline you at some point.

Now there is another message in verse 8. That message is, if you have never ever been disciplined by God, then you are not a Christian. If you have never ever been disciplined by God, then you are not a Christian. You are not going to Heaven. You are not one of His. That is bad news.

This passage of scripture tells us that God uses suffering to do what? Motivate us to not sin. Verse 9 says,

**Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. Hebrews 12:9-10 (NASB)**

That is why He disciplines us. Verse 10 tells us why He disciplines us. He uses suffering to make us holy. He wants to motivate you to be holy. He wants to motivate you to stop sinning. So, if you are suffering and you say, "I am a Christian. I am going through a really difficult time in my life." Guess what you need to explore? You need to ask yourself, is there a sin pattern in my life and is God trying to wake me up? Has God put me in the emergency room to try to motivate me to stop sinning? It is the sin that is negatively impacting your life.

Now, there are other reasons you could be suffering, so this might not be the reason you are suffering. This is one of the reasons we might be suffering. A serious question that

you need to ask yourself, if you are suffering in some way is why I am suffering? Is there sin in my life that I am not dealing with? That is the right question.

Watch this, sin is lawlessness. Sin is disobedience. Check out 1 John 3:4. Now, I want you to stop and think for a second. What kinds of discipline might God bring into your life as a result of sin? Here are some passages to look up and meditate over. In Hosea 4:1-5 we are told that God withheld blessing on the nation of Israel because of sin. That could also be true of our nation, of a state, a city or a home.

How about Malachi 3:10-11? That passage describes another way we suffer as the result of sin. In this passage, the Israelites were not giving money to God. In that passage God makes this incredible statement, "If you will give to me, I will stop the devourer." The message is that the reason you may not have enough money to meet your needs is because you are not giving money to God.

So that is one reason why you could be suffering. You are disobeying God. You are in sin. God tells you to give and you say, "I am going to do my thing. I am sure you understand why I am not giving to you." I think God understands why you do not want to give to Him. It is a heart problem.

In John 5:14, we find out that sin can make people sick. So, if you are sick, sin could be the root cause. Most of us jump to conclusions that illness is caused by sin, but that is not always true. There are other reasons people become ill.

In Matthew 6:33, God has just finished talking about how He takes care of the flowers of the field and how the Gentiles are worried about what they are going to eat, drink and wear. Then God says that if you will put me first in your life and seek righteousness, then all these things will be added to you. The message is that if you are not putting God first in your life and you are not pursuing holiness, then God will not meet your basic needs. God will withhold blessing from you.

In 1 Corinthians 11:28-32, Paul makes a most incredible statement and I want you to turn there because I want you to see it. In 1 Corinthians 11:28-32, Paul is talking about the Lord's Supper. In verse 28, Paul says,

**But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of**

*the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. 1 Corinthians 11:28 (NASB)*

The English word “sleep” in the New American Standard should be understood as “dead” and when it says that they are “weak,” it is the idea that you are “physically weak.” The Greek word actually has that meaning. So, the person has physical weakness. They are struggling and we ask, “Why did that happen?” Verse 28 says, you must examine yourself. Examine yourself for what? For sin. So, if you are not introspective, looking at the sin in your life and confessing your sins, but instead you are ignoring your sin, you could become sick and die. We are always anesthetizing our pain as opposed to dealing with our sin. We anesthetize our pain in order to cope with suffering that comes from our sin. Instead, we need to deal with our sin.

The message here is that if you are suffering and not dealing with your sin, your suffering is going to continue. In fact, your suffering might get worse, and then you will be looking for other methods to remove your pain. You will be looking for some other kind of way to anesthetize yourself.

**GOD USES SUFFERING TO PREVENT A CHRISTIAN FROM SINNING.** Let’s look at a third way that God uses suffering. God uses suffering to prevent Christians from sinning. Look at 2 Corinthians 12:7. Verse 7 says,

*Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me — to keep me from exalting myself! 2 Corinthians 12:7 (NASB)*

Paul is talking about suffering. He describes his suffering as a thorn in the flesh. I think we all know what a thorn in the flesh feels like. Maybe you have felt a thorn from a blackberry bush or a rose. Paul says his suffering was a messenger of Satan. I know that there are some who say, “Well, this was just an illness.” I think with Paul this was a messenger of Satan. How the messenger of Satan was the thorn in the flesh I do not know, but that is what Paul says. That’s the

plain literal reading of the words. The reason that God did this was to keep Paul from exalting himself.

So, God uses suffering to motivate us to not sin. Then what did Paul do? In verse 8 he said, “Concerning this I implored the Lord.” He prayed three times that the thorn would leave. Here we are told that the apostle prayed three times, “Please Lord, stop the suffering.” And then God told him,

*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness. 2 Corinthians 12:9 (NASB)*

What did God do? God answered, “No, no and no! Your suffering is going to continue. It is not going to stop.” You say, “What? He is an apostle!” Yes, he was an apostle. God told the apostle, “You are going to continue to suffer. I am not stopping it.” So, there might be some time in your life that you are suffering. You are really going through it and God might just be saying, “No, no and no. I am going to leave you there.” Why? Not because He wants you to be in pain. Instead, He may be trying to keep you from sinning as He allowed Paul to suffer to keep Paul from pride.

So, one way that God uses suffering is to demonstrate whether or not you are a real Christian. Another way that God uses suffering is to stop you from sinning. Another way that God uses suffering is to prevent you from, or to hinder you, or to motivate you to not sin. Now notice Paul’s response in verse 9. He gives us an incredible response in verse 9 which should be a comfort for all of us. I like how the Apostle Paul dealt with his suffering. Do you want to know how to deal with your suffering? Notice how Paul responded to God,

*And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 (NASB)*

Paul submitted to God. This incredible example reveals that God is in the process of trying to make you strong. That is why we suffer. What did Paul do? He said, "I am content." Rather than trying to get the suffering to stop, he said, "Thank you Lord. Thank you! I am going to go through it."

In our next study we will discover how to deal with your suffering in more detail.