

Welcome and Reminders

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Prayer and Praises

Introduction

Nobody wants to suffer. In fact, most of us try very hard to avoid it. Yet suffering is as much a part of our lives as breathing.

When we think about suffering, we can't help but relate it to our experiences. So I thought I would begin with an objective definition. I found Wikipedia gave a good one:

“Suffering, or pain in a broad sense, is an individual's basic affective experience of unpleasantness and aversion associated with harm or threat of harm. Suffering may be qualified as physical or mental. It may come in all degrees of intensity, from mild to intolerable. Factors of duration and frequency of occurrence usually compound that of intensity. In addition to such factors, people's attitudes toward suffering may take into account how much it is, in their opinion, avoidable or unavoidable, useful or useless, deserved or undeserved.”

➤ *Do you feel this is a good definition, or would you change or add to it?*

Over the next few Care Group sessions we will be discussing several aspects of suffering; suffering due to our own poor choices, suffering caused by others, suffering caused by circumstances such as death, illness or disaster, whether or not God causes our suffering, and our reactions to both our own suffering and the suffering of others. We will begin with suffering due to poor choices.

Suffering by Choice

I have a feeling that the majority of humanity's suffering is due to poor choices. I don't mean this to be a put-down. I believe most of us try to make good decisions, but we make them based on what we know at the time. For example, knowing I would get a house in Florida in my divorce, I purchased a mobile home here with the plan to pay it off after selling the Florida house. I bought just before the housing melt down. Now I can't sell the Florida house and am stuck with two mortgages. To top it all off, I am upside down in the mobile home. I felt the decision at the time was sound and responsible. I couldn't foresee the housing bust, and now I deal with the consequences of a situation I had no control over.

An old cliché says "hindsight is always wise". We all can look back at decisions we made and say, "If I had only made the other decision, I wouldn't be suffering now." But if you really think about it, there is no guarantee that taking the other road would not have downfalls as well, and no assurance that you would not be suffering from other consequences.

- *If you are willing, share one or more decisions you made in the past that have since nagged at your spirit over the years and left you thinking your life would have been so much better if you had made another choice.*
- *How could another choice, in the examples shared, produced a different suffering than the choice you made.*

Now let's think about some of the really bad choices that people make that result in suffering; things that lead to addiction, causing an accident because of drinking or distraction, actions done or words spoken out of anger that had disastrous results, choices that cause people to beat themselves up.

- *How can these disasters build our characters, mold our lives, even put people into or out of our lives that, in the long run, have made us better.*

When You Can't Change the Past

Let us remember that everyone makes wrong choices in life. Those choices do not define us, but they do help make us who we are according to how we react to them. Depending on our character, we react in different ways. We can:

- Learn from those choices
- Ignore them
- Hide from them
- Deny them
- Try to blame others for them
- Let them beat us up and destroy us
- Grow stronger and wiser because of them.

- *How do you tend to react to the choices you have made that have not worked out quite as well as you had hoped?*

I'm sure you all know someone who reacts to their own mistakes or bad choices in some of these ways. I once knew a person who would never accept the blame for anything, but always found a way to put the blame on someone else. I believe that when we try to get out of accepting responsibility for our behavior, even if we get away with it, we can only postpone suffering the consequences, and sometimes that results in deeper or longer suffering.

It may be hard, at times, to “fess up” and accept blame when we make mistakes. We may need to apologize, make amends or do something to set things right. But I believe it makes our suffering easier in the long run. If a poor choice causes long term suffering, we can only trust God to use it for good. How many testimonies have we heard of people turning their lives around after ending up in prison? I think of Squeaky Frome, one of those who took part in the Sharon Tate murder. She found Christ in prison and her witness remained a light of God's love to everyone with whom she made contact, until she died, still in prison.

I am always amazed at how people find peace and joy when they let God guide them through their suffering. I think of Joni Eareckson who, at the age of 17, dove into shallow water in Chesapeake Bay and broke her neck. The injury instantly transformed an active teen into a lifelong quadriplegic. Many would consider their life to be over – but Joni made other decisions. During her rehabilitation, Joni spent long months learning how to paint with a brush between her teeth. Her high-detail fine art paintings and prints are sought-after and collected. She served on the National Council on Disability under President Reagan and President Bush and the Disability Advisory Committee to the U.S. State Department under Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. She has received numerous honorary degrees and has written 48 books and numerous magazine articles. No one would blame her if she let her circumstances limit her life, but she made other decisions. Because she was willing, God gave her a wonderful ministry and made her an inspiration to millions.

Are you suffering because of one or more poor choices? If so, know that God loves you unconditionally. God knew the choices you would make, and God knows you are suffering. Allow God to give you strength to get through this time, and receive God's love and comfort. Know also that, if you allow it, you will emerge back into the sunshine with more strength, knowledge and wisdom, and you will be better prepared for whatever God has in store for your future.

- *Keeping in mind that this is a confidential group with a purpose of being committed to one another, does anyone want to share a request for prayer in an area in which they are suffering?*

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Prayer and Praises

Suffering Caused By Strangers

Last session we began to explore suffering that is caused by our own poor choices and what we can learn through it. Today we will discuss suffering that is caused by others and other circumstances and what we can learn from it.

We often hear of suffering caused by strangers; a drunk driver, drive-by shootings, physical attacks, random acts where you or a loved one are caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. The result can be pain or disability that lasts a long time, sometimes even a lifetime. People deal with this type of suffering in different ways. Some may get satisfaction when they have the opportunity to take part in causing the person to be convicted and sent to prison, or even death row. Others may remind everyone around them of what happened to them and how much suffering they endure. Still others continue to punish themselves by dwelling on the thought that if they had been somewhere else or done something else, they would not have been hurt. That is much like wishing we made a better choice, as we discussed in the last session.

➤ *How else do people deal with suffering caused by random acts?*

Years ago a woman was going home after a long day. She was speeding, but not carelessly. Coming over a bridge she did not see a child on a bicycle and she hit him. The child died. The newspapers reported the facts that she was driving over the speed limit and was charged for killing the child. The next Sunday someone in my Sunday school class said we should pray for the child and family, and discussion began with much anger toward the driver. Then another person spoke up. The driver was a friend of hers. She told how her friend was suffering. She had a bad day and much on her mind that day. Now, knowing she killed a child, she was devastated to the point of being unable to leave her home or to even get out of bed. She will

carry for the rest of her life the burden of knowing she caused the death of a child and suffering to the family.

- *If you were the child's family, would this perspective change how you would deal with this horrible event?*
- *When we suffer from a random act, how can we remind ourselves to think about it from another perspective?*

Suffering Caused By Loved Ones

More often than not, suffering caused by others comes from the actions of someone we know and probably care about. That makes it very personal. This is, therefore, often the most painful suffering, at least emotionally and spiritually, that we endure. Someone we know and trust suddenly blind-sides us by word or deed, and it is devastating.

Years ago a friend and neighbor lost her 3-day-old baby, her second child, and since I had been so close to her throughout the pregnancy and the days before he died, she asked me to inform the others in our small, close knitted neighborhood, which I did. A couple of weeks later I was talking to another friend on my back porch. We got to talking about parenting and I mentioned that this friend was more of an overprotective mother, while I was relaxed to the point of being quite under-protective. My next-door-neighbor, working in her garden by the fence, listened to the conversation and went to my friend, reporting that I was talking about her behind her back and criticizing her as a mother. When I went to visit my friend she wouldn't let me in the house, sending me away with accusations of gossip and friendship betrayal. I was crushed, first because she thought I had betrayed her, but also because my misinterpreted, although admittedly careless words, had hurt a friend who had just suffered a horrible loss. Neither woman spoke to me again. In our tight-knit group, that created some awkward moments. Fortunately we moved a few months later, but I never forgot the hurt.

Careless words and gossip probably cause more emotional suffering than any other dynamic, even in churches.

- *Would someone be willing to share a time when someone caused you suffering, how it affected you, if and how it was resolved, and what you learned. It might be appropriate to share something from the past that is unrelated to Valley Ministries or anyone your group knows.*

Sometimes we willingly and needlessly suffer because we take unintended offenses to heart and/or refuse to let go of offenses, sometimes for years.

- *How can we help ourselves and others in this situation?*

Years ago someone wrote a book and coined the profound statement that "hurting people hurt people." I carried suffering with me for many years for pain caused by my parents. God began

to show me how they had both been raised by parents who did not know how to show love, and had suffered much because of it. They did not have anyone to teach them how to love their own children and, though they truly did everything they knew how to raise us, they unknowingly inflicted much pain. Not because they wanted to hurt, but because they did not know how not to hurt.

If you are suffering, or have suffered, because of pain inflicted by someone you know, ask God to show you how they could be carrying their own suffering from having had pain inflicted on them by someone they knew and trusted. If it is a recent event consider praying for the person that God would heal their pain, and then let God heal yours.

Suffering Caused By Circumstances

One major difference between suffering caused by circumstances and those caused by others is that, unless one chooses to blame God, there is usually no one to blame for circumstantial suffering.

When we think about horrible circumstances we think about natural disasters such as tornadoes, earthquakes, hurricanes or fires. We also could think about sickness: Cancer, AIDS, hepatitis, and other like diseases that cause much suffering, not only for the patient but for friends and family.

Unlike emotional suffering, physical suffering is noticeable, and often causes others to want to help. Disasters sometimes cause people to do things they would never do normally. Think of someone who would never think of stealing from anyone. Disaster hits, he has lost his home and belongings and worries about how to provide for his family, and finds himself looting to get some things he needs. Any of us, given the right circumstances, can yield to temptation.

There are also those who profit from suffering. In Florida, when a hurricane destroys a city, there are some people who will buy a truckload of supplies and dash to the disaster area to sell for top dollar food, water, tools, building materials, and other supplies to those who have means and don't want to wait for FEMA and volunteers to arrive with help.

Disasters also bring out the best in many people. We hear stories of people heroically ignoring their own needs to help others who are in peril. Most of us have gathered food or clothes to send to disaster areas. Some of us have volunteered to deliver supplies, clean up, or provide other services to people. Some years ago we were on vacation when a hurricane hit our city. Friends who lived near the beach used our home as their shelter. After the storm many trees had fallen on homes or vehicles and many were blocking streets and driveways. Our property had little damage and our friends took a chain saw and drove around helping people who needed help removing trees.

We have all had opportunities to see on TV the effects of disasters and how people react. We think of the tsunami in Japan, 9-11 in New York, or hurricane Katrina. It is my observation that a few people seem to have a hero button in their spirits, and immediately begin saving others and

organizing others to help. A few people are unable to cope and just give up, either by not saving themselves when they can or by just sitting and watching others go on by. But the majority of people move through their upside down world in various stages of shock, doing what they can according to what is in front of them. When I watch these events I often wonder I would do in their situation.

- *Does someone have a personal testimony to share about experiencing a disaster or helping someone who has?*
- *What do you think makes the difference in how people react to disaster? Character? Faith? A need for recognition?*

A very common circumstantial suffering is sickness. Most of us have known someone with a serious illness, and some of us have suffered, or even now suffer from health problems.

- *From the point of view of the one who is ill, what are the challenges in dealing with suffering, ranging from moderate symptoms and pain to severe pain and even facing death?*
- *What are the challenges from the point of view of friends and relatives of the patient?*

Another common circumstantial suffering is from loss of a loved one. My first grandson was a full-term stillbirth. I was devastated. I asked someone at church to sing “It Is Well With My Soul,” thinking it would console me, but it didn’t. I cried on and off for several weeks. Although my life moved on, for the next two years there would be occasional moments when I would remember the loss and suffer again for a short time. Then, at a retreat, two friends and I went into a chapel to pray. I had one of those moments and began to cry. One of my friends began to pray for me, including in her prayer how she also felt loss, but because she was never able to have a child. Through that prayer God showed me another perspective, and my suffering left for good. Yes, I still remember the loss, but it doesn’t hurt any more.

- *Again, from the perspective of the one suffering the loss of a loved one, and from the friend who cares, what are the challenges?*

Possibly the hardest part of suffering is feeling we are alone. Let us constantly remind ourselves and each other that we are never alone. Whether or not we feel it, God is always there, pouring out love and comfort. Whether we are suffering or giving support to one who is, I believe we need to remember that God never leaves us. Let us learn to be comforted.

- *If someone would like prayer for pain caused by someone you know, please let us pray for you now.*

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Why Do People Suffer

Why is there suffering? Does God cause or just allow it? These are questions that have been studied and debated since the beginning of time. Authors have attempted to give insight and answers to those who are suffering. There are no pat answers that work for everyone, but together we might discover some nuggets of truth that help us.

The Old Testament is full of stories where God caused people to suffer; the great flood, the plagues in Egypt, the Israelites spending forty years in the wilderness, suffering predicted by the prophets that were to bring judgment. I used to believe, as many Christians do, that God uses disease and natural disasters to bring judgment.

But, except for the book of Revelation, the New Testament has not one example of God causing suffering, and I have changed my mind. I have a theory that I believe was a revelation from God. I will begin our discussion with it.

When God created the world God set in place natural laws. A great example is gravity. You can praise God for hours and have all the faith in the world, but if you jump off a tall building without a parachute, you will splat on the sidewalk below. Weather is controlled by the Earth's cycles around the sun, high and low pressures, and other things I don't understand. Geological changes such as earthquakes and volcanoes are the results of structural laws set at creation. Germs, bacteria and viruses serve a purpose in the balance of nature. Forest rangers know now that fire, though it may destroy habitat and kill some animals, is necessary to promote new growth.

We humans take our chances when we choose to live in different places. New Orleans was built on a flood plain. Men built levees to try to keep the water out, but there was always the possibility they would fail, as they did after Hurricane Katrina. Those who choose to live in the desert know they will struggle with water issues. Wherever we live, there are possibilities for disaster, whether drought, floods, blizzards, hurricanes, or whatever. Some believe the way we live influences the natural laws, such as pollution and global warming, and they may be right.

We know that certain lifestyles make us more susceptible to certain diseases. Smoking, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, eating unhealthy foods, sexual carelessness, poor hygiene, too little or too much exercise, dangerous sports, all contribute to early disease or death. Yet we all know someone who lived a healthy lifestyle and still was stricken with cancer or some other horrible disease.

- *Do you think God causes suffering today? Why or why not?*
- *If God really loves us, why should we suffer?*

We know that God has the power to stop natural disasters. Jesus calmed a storm with three words. I have heard stories of people miraculously saved from disaster. I personally know that angels have intervened and protected me from car accidents.

We also know God can heal any disease, yet many good people who love and trust God die every day. One story that is often used by preachers as an example of miraculous healing is John 5:2-8.

“Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of weak folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatever disease he had. And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years. When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he said to him, Will you be made whole? The weak man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steps down before me. Jesus said to him, Rise, take up your bed, and walk.” AKJV

When I read this passage I often ask the question. “Why did Jesus heal only one of the multitude when, with a wave of His hand, He could have healed everyone there?”

One person is saved in a disaster, another is lost. One person is healed of disease, another dies.

- *Can we, or should we understand why God chooses to save one and not the other?*
- *Can we influence our own fate?*

Several movies have been made about someone traveling back in time. There is usually a wise scientist who warns that changing anything in the past could have disastrous effects. Is this true? Let's look at one scenario.

Few men in history have caused more suffering than did Adolph Hitler. Let's imagine God prevented Hitler from becoming a leader, even from forming the Nazi party. How could that be disastrous for us today?

The rise of Hitler caused the Japanese to believe they could defeat America, and it was the attack on Pearl Harbor that brought America into World War II. The war machine of WWII brought this country out of the great depression. The depression was world-wide, and Germany's war machine was instrumental in bringing Europe out of the depression.

Thousands of men and women fought and died in the war. Many babies were born because of the war, and many babies were not born because of those who died. That alone would mean thousands of people who have lived in the last fifty years would not have lived, and there would be thousands of different people alive now. There is no way of knowing how that dynamic would change our world today.

Wars generate new technology. Most of our trauma medicine was learned during wartime, and that knowledge is often the basis for new technology that saves many lives. The jet engine was invented during the war, as was nuclear warfare. Nuclear war is a horrible thing, but nuclear energy and nuclear medicine have helped millions.

WWII was the true beginning of the Women's Lib movement. Before the war, few women had any desire to hold a job. Girls got married at young ages, with or without a high school education, and became homemakers and mothers. When the men went to war in 1941, women went to the factories. They learned how to do "men's" jobs and had the satisfaction of being paid for their work. This also brought about the new concept of child daycare. After the war most of the women were fired and the men were hired back, but women didn't forget the experience. If they couldn't get a better education and a job, they encouraged their daughters to go to college after finishing high school and prepare for a career, rather than get married and start a family. It would be another twenty years before the movement would be named and would explode, but it began because of the war.

Please don't lose focus here. I am not trying to glamorize or advocate war. This is simply an example of how the rise of Hitler and WWII set off a chain of events that had a tremendous effect on our society today. There is no way of knowing what would have happened, good or bad, had Hitler not lived.

We must always remember that we can only reflect on the past, or see what is happening today. But God sees the end from the beginning. God knows what you will be doing on June 23, 2020, and God knows all the things that must take place for that to happen.

- *What are some strategies you use help you to trust God, through all our suffering, through all the natural and unnatural disasters that take place in our world, to keep us and get us through, in order to be ready for whatever God has for us in our future?*
- *What can we learn from our suffering?*

Whether you believe God causes suffering or allows it, the Bible tells us that God uses suffering for our good and God's glory.

“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” James 1:2,3

James 1:2-3 tells us that suffering will produce patience and endurance in our faith and that we should count it all joy. It is hard to say “Oh joy, I'm suffering,” but if we remember God is strengthening our faith, it might make it more endurable.

“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” 1 Peter 1:6,7

1 Peter 1:6,7 reminds us that suffering brings out the genuineness of our faith that will praise, honor and bring glory to Jesus.

- *What other ways can God use our suffering?*

It would be good to keep these thoughts in mind when going through hard times and allow them to bring us comfort and peace.

Our Response to Suffering

There is a story about one of the great evangelists of the 19th century, I believe it was John Wesley but can't remember for sure, who went on a long mission trip. While he was away his house burned to the ground. When he returned and saw the damage, he calmly said, “I wonder why God would burn my house down.”

I believe the depth of our true character is revealed in the way we react to negative circumstances. Anytime I make the mistake of thinking too highly of myself, I catch myself reacting badly to a situation.

We cannot control circumstances, whether it be sickness, disaster or what other people do or say, but we can control how we react. (Please repeat that sentence slowly.) If we are to be witnesses for Christ, we must control how we react.

We cannot control our feelings, but we must learn to control our words and actions. Toddlers are known for throwing tantrums when they don't get their own way. They will cry, throw themselves to the ground, kick, hit, or exhibit other forms of anger. Adults also throw tantrums; they just act them out in different ways. When hurt by another person, some people lash out verbally, saying angry and hurtful things, usually to the one they are angry at, but too often to anyone they come in contact with. Some people react physically, inflicting as much injury they can. Some people contact as many people as they can, trying to get them to take their side of a disagreement or just feeding a gossip crusade. Others quietly plan and execute an act of vengeance. Unfortunately, too many people hang on to the hurt, allowing it to become bitterness, and let it affect their lives for years. I'm sure you can all think of someone who has told you something like, "I will never be able to forgive so-and-so because of what he said/did to me so many years ago."

When disaster strikes people react in many ways. Most of us have seen one of the many movies made about the Titanic. One man is famous for dressing like a woman and getting in the lifeboat with the women and children. It is well documented that the lifeboats were not filled to capacity. It is also well documented that those in the lifeboats could have gone back and saved many but were too afraid. There were also many acts of heroism on the Titanic, those who sacrificed themselves to help and save others. Like so many, I have watched reports of disasters on television: 911, Hurricane Katrina, the tsunami in Japan. I sometimes wonder what I would do if caught in a disaster. What kind of character would be revealed?

I have watched people go through health challenges, dealing with pain, facing death. Anyone in a lot of pain or facing death is going to go through times of anger and depression. However, it is still possible to treat others with kindness and love, even when we are suffering.

Years ago I checked a Christian woman into the hospital. I often asked new patients lightly, "what are you in for?" The usual answer was for a particular surgery or treatment. This lady said kindly, "I have stomach cancer. I'm terminal." She knew she would soon be going to her Heavenly home. For the three days she was conscious she treated everyone who cared for her with kindness and appreciation, in spite of her suffering. Her husband, who rarely left her side, did the same. They did not use their suffering as an excuse to lash out at others.

There are many ways we humans react to suffering. We can:

- ♦ Embrace the attitude that misery loves company and share our suffering with as many as possible.
- ♦ Always blame others for our suffering.
- ♦ Become angry and lash out at everyone around us.
- ♦ Feel sorry for ourselves and willingly dive into depression. (Not to be confused with chemical imbalances that cause depression.)
- ♦ Desperately make bad choices, trying to get out of the bind we are in.
- ♦ Allow our suffering to destroy us physically, emotionally, spiritually.
- ♦ Become angry and bitter toward God for allowing our suffering.
- ♦ Allow suffering to draw us closer to God and help us to grow stronger and wiser.

- *Share your thoughts, feelings or experiences about reacting to suffering.*
- *How can we prepare our hearts to show more compassion for others who are suffering, even if they are suffering because of poor choices?*
- *How can we prepare our hearts and characters to respond in a more Christ-like way when we are suffering from acts of others, disasters, or sickness?*