

The Fruits of Afflictions

A look at the Bible's explanation for trials and suffering

“To become a Christian is not to escape from suffering, but to be able to bear suffering with dignity and hope.” (Dictionary of Bible Themes, sectioned under “suffering”)

Introduction:

For centuries people have wondered why there is suffering in the world. It is not a bad question to ask, but it is certainly unwise to think that there is no answer. It is even more unwise to think there is no answer simply because we did not receive the answer we want. Often the answer we want is one which ends the suffering, but the truth is more complicated.

There are common assumptions which must be addressed: 1. The Bible does not address the issue of suffering; and 2. Suffering is abnormal. Concerning the first point, this study will show that the Bible is not only not silent on the issue of pain, affliction and suffering, but in fact the Bible gives very specific reasons for it. This study will focus on the benefits of suffering as described by God for His children. Concerning the second point, it seems odd of us to assume as we do that suffering is abnormal when it is so common. Our society believes and teaches us that luxury, comfort, and healthiness are normal, whereas pain, suffering, and sickness are abnormal, when the evidence of reality is the exact opposite. The evidence of our time and of history displays our world to be one in which luxury and comfort are for a select few, and pain, suffering, and affliction are for everyone – including, inevitably, the select few.

As Christians living in America, we must reorient our thinking so that we do not think along with the world that suffering is abnormal, because it is not. It is normal. And God uses

suffering for specific purposes.

I. Things to keep in mind:

There are a few things to keep in mind to help us in this study. These are things which concern those who are suffering, those who want to help the suffering of others, or both.

Attitudes to keep in mind.

We must not:

1. Nurture a *woe is me* attitude. This is a kind of pleasure and indulgence in suffering which is not beneficial to anyone – neither to those suffering nor to those comforting.

Woe is me translates to *I don't deserve this*, when the truth is that all have sinned therefore all deserve far worse than any suffering in this life.

2. Be afraid to speak our hearts to God. Job questioned why God let Job suffer, and God said that Job was right in what he spoke.¹ If we have anger or resentment about our situations, God can handle our anger. There is a difference between speaking our hearts to God and cursing God.

3. Blame the victim. It is easy to have this attitude without realizing it. This might be thinking in our hearts that homeless people bring poverty on themselves, or thinking women who suffer sexual crimes bring it on themselves for wearing revealing clothing. We must exercise wisdom in knowing when to tell someone they are wrong and when to comfort someone during their affliction.

4. Try to solve all of another person's problems for them. There is a time to help those who are in need, but Paul tells us to weep with those who weep. He does not tell us to try

¹ Job 42:7.

to stop those who are weeping from weeping by telling them how to fix their problems.²

5. Forget we live in a world broken by sin. The world is not unpleasant because of God, but because of sin. Although suffering is unpleasant, there is no guarantee that we will ever stop suffering. We may have to endure it until we die because of sin in the world.

Passages to keep in mind:

1. God delivers, but in His time and in His way.³

2. In these (tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, etc.) we are more than conquerors because none of them can separate us from the love of Christ.⁴

3. Don't be surprised by trials and tribulations.⁵

4. Those who suffer for the sake of righteousness are blessed.⁶

5. All things work for good for those who love God.⁷

II. The fruits of afflictions:

1. Returning to God. (Deut. 4:26-31; Is. 10:20-21; 2 Sam. 12:15b-23; Jer. 31:18-20)

2. Trusting God and not ourselves. (2 Cor. 1:8-11)

3. Prayer. (Jdg. 3:7-9; Lam. 2:17-19; Jonah 2)

4. Convincing/reminding us of sin. (Ps. 119:66-67; Lk. 15:15-21; Nu. 21:5-7)

5. God's glory. (Jn. 9:1-3; 11:1-4; 21:18-19)

6. Our glory and the glory of other Christians. (Ro. 8:16-18; 2 Cor. 4:16-18; Eph. 3:11-13; 2 Tim. 2:9-10; Jas. 1:12)

7. Contentment. (2 Cor. 12:7-10)

2 Romans 12:15.

3 Daniel 3:16-18; Psalm 34:19; 2 Corinthians 4:8-11.

4 Romans 8:35-39.

5 1 Peter 4:12-13; Acts 14:21-22.

6 1 Peter 3:13-17; Matthew 5:10-12.

7 Romans 8:28.

8. Sincerity in serving God (even through testing). (Ps. 66:8-12; Pr. 17:3; Job 23:10; Heb. 11:17-19; Deut. 8:1-2, 16; Rev. 2:10)

9. Humility. (Deut. 8:3, 16; 2 Ch. 7:11-14; 2 Cor. 12:7; 1 Pet. 1:6-9; 5:6-10)

10. Purification. (Eccl. 7:2-3; Is. 1:24-26; 48:9-11; Jer. 9:6-9; Zech. 13:7-9; Mal. 3:2-4; Heb. 12:10-11)

11. Patience. (Ps. 40:1-4; Ro. 5:3-5; Jas. 1:2-4; 1 Pet. 2:18-21)

12. Good works. (John 15:1-3; Heb. 12:10-11)

13. Sharing the gospel. (Acts 8:3-4; 11:19-21; Php. 1:12-14; 2 Tim. 4:16-18)

14. Unity. (Rom. 12:15-16)

15. Learning about God and His will. (Ps. 119:71; Is. 26:9; Mic. 6:9)

16. Being comforted and comforting others. (2 Cor. 1:3-7; Is. 12:1-2)

17. The presence of God. (Is. 43:1-3; Ps. 23:1-4; 34:19)

III. Practical applications.

1. Practice and meditate on the fruits.

a. The fruits of affliction are meant to help us go through affliction. Remember:

Going through affliction is not the same as taking it out of our lives.

b. Look over the above fruits. Add passages or other fruits.

c. Don't be overwhelmed by the various fruits. Focus on one fruit at a time and ask

yourself two questions: 1. "Has my affliction helped me to grow in this area?";

and 2. "How can I grow in this fruit today?"

2. Recognize the uniqueness of your affliction.

a. Not everyone suffers in the same way. The death of a child is far different than a

divorce which is far different than political oppression.

b. Don't compare your fruit with the fruit of others who are suffering. A fruit such as prayer may grow out of all kinds of affliction, but the way in which a person learns to pray will be unique to their affliction.

3. View suffering in the right light.

a. Be careful about thinking of suffering in terms of success or failure/right or wrong. Comfort can be the result of sin and suffering the result of righteousness.

b. If someone else is causing your suffering, understand where your power lies.

1.) You don't have the power to override their free-will.

2.) Love does what's best for someone even when they hate you for it. Just because someone is mad at you or causing your suffering doesn't mean you're in the wrong.

3.) Exercise wisdom when dealing with another person – when to engage with them and when not to engage with them.

c. We're wrong to think of all suffering as punishment from God.

1.) The blind man and his parents in John 9 went through decades of hardship because the man was born blind. It wasn't punishment but it was for the glory of God.

2.) Accept that we may never know the reason for our suffering. Jesus's explanation to His disciples may have never been known by the blind man.

4. Express yourself to God.

a. Don't bottle-up your feelings about your situation. God wants you to think of

Him as your Father.

b. Pray a lot and try writing your prayers in a journal. This will help you to track the path of your affliction and to help you see if God has answered your prayers.

c. Read a few psalms daily. The Book of Psalms teaches us how to pray and how to express ourselves to God.

5. Trust the church to help you.

a. One of the fruits of affliction is unity. Your affliction may strengthen your closeness with a familiar brother or sister, or may help you grow close to someone you don't know at all.

b. Don't be discouraged if the church lets you down. Your affliction may be the first time they've ever experienced the situation first-hand.

c. Know that the church is thinking about you. They may not say it even when you need to hear it the most, but that doesn't mean they're not praying for you.

d. Accept the help of the church. Helping those who are suffering takes lifelong training and practice. Christians will never learn to take care of other Christians in need if Christians in need don't accept the help of the church.