

### The Suffering Counselor

By Ben Hein

**W**e've all felt it.

That pain in our soul that lies somewhere in between that ache in our chest we felt when we first experienced grief and loss, and the cold sweats we have in the evening before a big presentation at the office. The exhaustion that comes from spinning thoughts in our heads over and over. It's the inexpressible confusion that can only be summarized by the question, "*Oh God, why is this happening to me?*"

This is the question we all ask when suffering hits and we do not know how to process it. We swing back and forth between emotions like a grandfather clock gone haywire. Our cultural influences tell us to react in one of two ways. On the one hand, we are told to rise above our suffering and our circumstances in order to remove ourselves from the situation. The other tendency, which is perhaps more dominant in Western culture, is to suppress and avoid suffering altogether. This view could best be summarized by the last great Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius who said, "Indeed in the case of most pains let this remark of Epicurus aid you, that pain is neither intolerable nor everlasting if you bear in mind that it has its limits...When then you are discontented about any of these things (pain), say to yourself that you are yielding to pain."<sup>1</sup>

While the cultural norms instruct us to believe that purpose is found above or away from suffering, the Bible teaches that hope and purpose is found *in the midst of* our suffering. The best way for us to understand this is first by briefly looking at a Christian theology of suffering. We will then be able to see God's purpose for us in the midst of our afflictions.

It is impossible to avoid suffering in this life. From the moment of conception to the day we are laid to rest, we are subject to pain and sorrow in this life. There is a popular misconception that individuals turn to Christianity in order to have suffering alleviated or altogether removed. But this is entirely antithetical to the message our God gives to us.

Did you know that there are more Psalms of lament than any other genre? Surely this gives us a clue to how common the experience of pain and suffering is going to be in this life. Jesus promised us in John 15 and 16 that we will suffer for following him. The entire letter of 1 Peter is written to a group of Christians who are facing trials and suffering for the sake of the gospel. Paul tells us in Romans 8:17 that we are children of God *if* we suffer with Christ. Again he says in 2 Timothy 3:12 that "*all* who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." The author of Hebrews reminds us that those who are not disciplined by God are *illegitimate children* (12:8). Many Christians today are taught that suffering occurs as a lack of our own faith. It is a sobering thought to examine just how much we've bought into this lie in light of the Bible's cohesive teaching on the subject.

The message is clear: Christ-followers will suffer in this life. But what does it mean to experience pain and affliction as the Bible teaches us? I think most of us are led to believe that these passages speak to some unique form of Christian persecution which comes from publicly following Christ. While this aspect of suffering is certainly included, these passages are not speaking of *only* this kind of suffering. Dr. Richard Gaffin summarizes Christian suffering well: "Christian suffering, then, is everything in our lives in this present order, borne for Christ and done in his service. Suffering with Christ includes not only monumental and traumatic crises, martyrdom and overt persecution, but it is to be a daily affair – the mundane frustrations and

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 54.

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unspectacular difficulties of our everyday lives, when they are endured for his sake.”<sup>2</sup> Any and all suffering and affliction we endure in this life – *when we endure them for Christ’s sake* – are uniquely Christians sufferings.

You might be asking, “How can this be the case?” After all, don’t Christians experience many of the same that non-Christians do? Cancer isn’t uniquely Christian, so why is it that if a Christian is diagnosed with cancer it becomes Christian suffering? The answer lies in the fact that as children of God who have placed their faith in the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ, our suffering is redeemed. God uses the very things that are intended to destroy us to mature his children and make them more like Christ (1 Peter 1:3-9).

### **Purpose in Suffering**

But why does God allow us to suffer? It is impossible to know the exact reasons for what we are going through: it might be a result of the general state of the world and natural forces, it might be a result of someone else’s or our own sins, or it could be from a host of many other reasons. However, the important question to ask is not “*Why is this happening to me?*” More often than not, we will not be able to answer this question. Instead, we should be asking “*What is God’s purpose for me in the midst of my suffering?*”

In today’s Christian subculture, we love to make signs, posters and desktop backgrounds with “inspirational” Bible verses (Philippians 4:13, 1 Corinthians 13, and 1 John 3 all come to mind). Unfortunately, one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible is often skipped on these signs. That passage is 2 Corinthians 1:3-7. The Apostle Paul writes:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.*

This is one of my favorite passages in the whole Bible. Paul teaches us that God is the source of *all* mercy and comfort, even in the affliction we cannot see or feel him working in. We are told that although we share in Christ’s sufferings, we will also share *abundantly* in comfort as well. God comforts us in our affliction *so that* we will be able to comfort others in their affliction.

So what does this passage teach us about the purpose of suffering in the Christian community? Our suffering is meant to create an army of Christian counselors who become uniquely equipped to comfort others in their suffering. This is a part of God’s glorious and beautiful outworking of redemption in his people! While the world around us tells us to flee suffering, God instead equips us to live out the second greatest commandment (Mark 12:31). For this reason, we agree with Charles Spurgeon who wrote, “I am almost persuaded that those of God’s servants who have been most highly favoured have suffered more times of darkness than others.”<sup>3</sup> It doesn’t matter whether your suffering is depression or cancer, God’s purpose for you is to receive his comfort and then take it to others who are suffering. As we suffer, our churches are collectively strengthened.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Gaffin, “The Last Adam, the Life-Giving Spirit” in *The Forgotten Christ*, 231.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, The Journal of Biblical Counseling Number 3, Spring 2000.

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In this way, the church is to be marked by Christians who faithfully provide godly counsel to one another – even in the midst of their own pains and afflictions.

You could be tempted to doubt that this is the purpose for *all* Christians in the midst of their suffering. Perhaps you think that you can provide no comfort to anyone else because you're barely hanging on. However, don't underestimate your ability to comfort and provide counsel to someone who has already thrown in the towel.

Recently I've been weighed down by an immense fear over the future – job, finances, family, children, etc. In moments where my fear is especially strong I become overwhelmed with the temptation to just give up and pursue a new vocation with more stability and predictability. During one of those moments this week, a friend of mine emailed me telling me that he would be experiencing a job change soon.

He asked me to pray that he would remain faithful during his transition. Even though he didn't know it, he provided so much encouragement to me! Just when I was tempted to despair, a friend was able to motivate me to keep going simply by a demonstration of his faithfulness.

Friend, don't underestimate what God is doing for his people in the midst of your suffering and affliction. God's purpose for your suffering is to be a benefit not only to you as he makes you more like Christ, but also to bless and benefit his other children who are suffering. The counsel you bring to others as they experience pain and affliction will have a ripple effect in your Christian community that you will likely never see. It is a beautiful thing when we all play our part in the household of faith!