

Making Sense of Suffering

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It has been said, “To live is to suffer; to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering.” Suffering is an unavoidable part of the human experience. Suffering exposes our character and tests our faith. We try to find meaning and understanding through adverse events.

Most are familiar with their travels to the city of Philippi (Acts 16). They suffered violence and injustice for preaching the Gospel. The account may prove helpful for us to make sense of suffering.

1. God sent Paul and Silas to Philippi. Paul and Silas never intended to go to Philippi. They had planned to go to Asia and Bithynia, but the Spirit redirected them (Acts 16:6-7). Paul received a vision in which a Macedonian asked Paul for help. Paul concluded that God wanted them to go to Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10).

On this trip, Paul and his companions went to Philippi, a Roman colony in the province of Macedonia. They preached to people who were unaware of what God accomplished through the Messiah. Yet, during their work, they were persecuted. Did God send them to Philippi to be beaten and imprisoned? If they would have gone to Bithynia, could they have avoided persecution? Persecution certainly can spark a crisis of faith.

Of course, this was not the first time Paul had been violently harmed for his ministry. Earlier, he had been stoned in Lystra (Acts 14:19). However, Paul understood that persecution was a reality for Christians. After surviving the stoning, he reminded the saints at Lystra that “we must enter the kingdom of God through many tribulations” (Acts 14:22).

We must recognize this same truth today. God has sent us on a mission. We are to be teaching the Gospel. There are times when we may have to defend the Gospel. Doing the work of God can illicit harsh responses. God does not intend us harm by sending us into the world. God protects us by faith in our trials. Like Paul, we must not allow criticism, rejection, or even violence to destroy our faith and stop our mission. God’s purposes can be met through our suffering.

2. The importance of proper self-image. One reason we struggle to understand suffering relates to our self-image. We cannot understand how “*bad things happen to good people.*” This thought process assumes that we are good. But, are we good? Jesus was once referred to by someone as “Good Teacher.” Jesus responded to this man by saying, “...Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone” (Mark 10:18).

Where does our logic get us when we begin our reasoning process that we are good or innocent? *We are good; therefore, suffering or calamity is undeserved; therefore, God is unjust; therefore, God cannot exist.* This reasoning can happen quickly or slowly. Any step in this thought process can eat us alive. Reasoning from the standpoint that we are good is dangerous.

Jesus acknowledged what few are willing to accept: *no one is good except God alone*. Paul was able to endure persecution partly because he accepted this truth. Paul never described himself as good or innocent. Paul described himself as the vilest of sinners.

Accepting that we are sinners is not designed to destroy us. It is intended to draw us to the grace of God. Like Paul, we deserve punishment for our sin; yet, the grace of God grants us mercy through faith (1 Tim. 1:12-16). When Paul was persecuted, his faith rested in the grace of God. If he would have viewed himself as being a “good person,” he may have viewed his suffering as an act of divine injustice. We need to be warned about false assumptions. They can be corrected by the truth; however, they also can destroy faith.

3. When persecuted, Paul and Silas worshipped God. Paul and Silas were not superheroes. They were human. They were hurting, tired, and hungry. Beaten and imprisoned, they had a bad day. There was nothing enjoyable about what they experienced. We can only imagine what might have been going through their minds. Yet, we do not have to imagine what they did. Luke tells us that they sang and prayed.

Worshipping through suffering is critical for our faith. Worshipping stabilized Paul and Silas at a pivotal moment. Worship helped them draw closer to God and bonded them together by this shared experience. Also, the other prisoners heard them worshipping. They became a beacon of light in a dark prison at midnight.

When we are at our worst, God’s grace is at its best. The more our weaknesses are exposed, the more the power of God’s grace shows. Regarding God’s grace, Paul once wrote, “... I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

4. Love transformed Paul. Suffering can drastically alter our personality and behavior. It can skew our perspective to the detriment of others. Yet, this did not happen to Paul and Silas. An earthquake freed the prisoners. The Roman soldier on guard that night assumed the prisoners escaped. In a state of panic, he took his sword and... Of course, we know how this event ended. However, consider an alternative ending.

Imagine that Silas caught a glimpse of the Roman soldier about to commit suicide. He springs into action and starts to open his mouth to stop him, but Paul grabs Silas. Paul covers Silas’ mouth and tells him to stay quiet. The Roman soldier kills himself. Paul and Silas escape from prison.

This is how Hollywood would have written the ending; however, the event had an astonishingly strange and unusual conclusion. Paul saves the Roman soldier’s life. Then, Paul pointed the Roman soldier to the One who could save his soul. The Roman soldier and his household obeyed the Gospel. Men who were enemies became brothers in the family of God. This is astounding. Such is only possible by the transforming power of God’s love.

The love of God proven through the Gospel reshaped Paul's heart. As a Jew, he would have considered the Romans his enemy. As a Christian, however, Paul viewed the Romans as sinners in need of the Savior. Despite the suffering caused by the Romans, Paul remained intent on teaching the Gospel even to his captors. The love of God enabled Paul to see a hopeful opportunity even while suffering.

Conclusion

The teaching of Paul and Silas yielded surprising results in Macedonia. Jews and Gentiles obeyed the Gospel. A new church in Philippi was formed. On an even broader scale, the Gospel spread to Europe by way of Neapolis. God was able to bring good through the suffering of Paul and Silas and He can yield similar results through our suffering. Just because we may not understand the reason for our suffering does not mean there isn't one.

Paul explained the approach we are to take when suffering. As people transformed by the grace of God, Paul wrote, "...we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:3-5). Paul did not just write about this process. He lived it to his dying breath.