

# Suffering – an Advent Study



## Session 3. Our Suffering

### **Read these Quotations**

*“What healing can we hope for in our suffering? The longing is for something magical, the quick fix, the miraculous touch or medicine, the dramatic release. And occasionally the miracle does happen. One of the best attested facts about Jesus is that he healed people. God is a God of surprises, hears prayers, and has compassion on suffering. It is always right to ask.”* David Ford “The shape of living”

*“In the face of suffering and oppression of God’s people, Jesus was compelled by love to lift them out of darkness into the light of God’s presence. Jesus was consumed by a single-hearted desire to do what God desired for God’s people. And what God desired for God’s people was life; life to the full.”* Monica Brown “Embodying the God we proclaim”

*“And what about the times when no good at all seems to come from suffering? When there is no happy ever after? What if, rather than bringing their extended family closer together, the death of a couple’s daughter causes more division and hurt within the family? What if, unable to cope with the differences in how each comes to terms with their loss, the couple grow apart, ending their marriage in divorce?”* Steve Chalke and Paul Hansford “The truth about suffering”

*“He who fears he shall suffer, already suffers what he fears.”* Michel de Montaigne “The Complete Essays”

*“We are healed of a suffering only by experiencing it to the full.”* Marcel Proust “Remembrance of Things Past”. Volume 3

*\*\*With someone else, discuss their meaning for you and the extent to which they resonate with how you think about suffering and pain.*

## **Our Own Experience of Suffering**

We have all experienced a variety of forms of suffering in our lives and if we are honest we have probably at some times dealt with it better than at others. But what does “*dealing with*” suffering mean? Does it mean pushing it away or submerging it in other things, or perhaps it means something more redemptive. Everyone deals with suffering differently and also our approach is dependent on many factors, including the type of suffering that we are experiencing and perhaps whether or not we feel any culpability for it.

*\*\*With someone else, talk about your experience of suffering and what meaning, if any, that you might see in it particular experiences.*

## **Suffering and Meaning**

Suffering, in many ways, remains a mystery, one that we will never fully understand this side of eternity, but let us consider six short passages of Scripture and think about whether or not suffering has purpose in our lives:

### **1) Suffering and intimacy with God**

After 41 chapters of suffering, Job finds that he has developed a deeper connection to God:

*“My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.” (Job 42:5)*

Perhaps during times of suffering, we might experience God at a deeper or more profound level?

### **2) Suffering and bringing comfort to others**

Paul certainly felt that his suffering equipped him to be of comfort to others who were suffering:

*“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction*

*with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ.” (2 Corinthians 1:3-5)*

Experience of suffering might give us more compassion for others who are hurting and help us to minister more effectively to their needs?.

*“People who suffer want people who have suffered to tell them there is hope. They are justifiably suspicious of people who appear to have lived lives of ease.”* John Piper and Justin Taylor *“Suffering and the Sovereignty of God”*

### **3) Suffering as a refiner**

God grabs Isaiah’s attention and makes it quite plain that there is much hidden below the surface which God alone knows about.

*“I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.”* (Isaiah 48:10)

Pain and suffering have a way of bringing our strengths and weaknesses to the surface, of showing us our best and worse sides. Does this help us to improve as people cultivating our strengths and addressing our weaknesses?

### **4) Suffering and maturity of faith**

The writer of the Epistle of James certainly thinks that trial and tribulation is a good thing in relation to developing maturity of faith:

*“My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”* (James 1:2-4).

Perhaps if we turn toward God in our pain, He might use our suffering to mature our faith. This is perhaps best illustrated through situations past and present where the Church faces persecution.

## **5) Suffering conforming us to God's image**

*“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.”*  
(Romans 8:26-29).

These verses might be saying that God brings good out of everything. But while He can and does redeem suffering in our lives, perhaps these verses are more about us being conformed to God's image through our suffering?

## **6) Suffering to keep us on the straight and narrow**

Paul seemed to think something of this sort when he wrote:

*“To keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.”* (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

## **Finally**

Sometimes of course, we can't find any meaning in our suffering and like Job or Jesus on the Cross, can feel utterly abandoned by God.

At that point Jesus quoted words from Psalm 22:1:

*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?”*

Did God abandon His Son in His hour of need? Of course we find the answer three days later, when God raised Him from the dead. It is this truth that lies at the core of our faith and because of that we can have cause for hope no matter what happens, even though at times that can be hard.