

The Value of Human Suffering

By [Wayne Jackson](#)


It has been said that there is no greater education than matriculating through the “University of Hard Knocks.”

One thing is certain. Many who have passed through the crucible of suffering acknowledge that they found themselves infinitely better for the experience—bitter though it may have been.

I know something about it. I have been diagnosed with cancer five times. Each time I received the sobering news and had to endure surgeries, treatments, and harsh medications, I was compelled to think carefully about what my afflictions were teaching me.

Robert Browning Hamilton expressed this thought so wonderfully in verse:

I walked a mile with Pleasure
She chatted all the way,
But left me none the wiser
For all she had to say.
I walked a mile with Sorrow
And ne'er a word said she;
But oh, the things I learned from her
When Sorrow walked with me!

Atheism, of course, alleges that the problem of human suffering represents one of the more formidable arguments against the existence of a powerful and loving God. It is not my intention to respond to that baseless argument here. I have addressed it elsewhere in detail. See [Three Great Facts about God](#) .

At this point, it will suffice simply to say that God has, as an expression of his love (1 Jn. 4:8), granted mankind free will (Josh. 24:15; cf. Isa. 7:15). That free will enables human beings to make personal choices. Foolish choices can sometimes have devastating consequences (e.g., suffering). Thus, the responsibility for **unwise choices** is man's, not God's.

The problem of human suffering is not irreconcilable with the love of a benevolent Creator.

But in this article, we will limit our discussion to the **benefits** that suffering can provide—if we are wise enough to learn the lessons.

Suffering Is a Reminder of Our Infirmary

Suffering highlights the fact that we are frail human beings. That is to say, we are not God.

Some, however, have no greater ambition than to be their own God. They are “autotheists”—self-gods. They imagine that they are accountable to no one higher than themselves. To borrow the words of the infidel poet, William Ernest Henley, they are the masters of their fate and the captains of their souls!

These rebels submit to no law save the self-imposed law of their own arrogant minds.

But when we suffer, we are **forced to focus** on our own weaknesses. There is no remedy within us (see Job 6:13). It is hard to be prideful when you are hurting.

Pain can be humbling. It can slap the smart-aleckness out of us, and open our hearts to greater vistas.

Suffering Provides a Reason to Call on the Lord

Suffering can draw our interests toward the true God.

When we are in a state of anguish that offers little respite, the natural inclination is to turn toward a higher source for help. Only a deliberate and forced stubbornness can quench that urge.

When we are hurting, the “God of all comfort” (2 Cor. 1:3) is waiting to help.

Joe, a personal friend of mine, was taught the gospel of Christ and happily embraced it. He was united with the Lord in baptism (Rom. 6:3ff). For a while, this likable gentleman in his mid-forties struggled to remain faithful against the powerful, negative influences of a family that had zero interest in spiritual matters.

Finally, he drifted away from conscientious service.

Then, Joe suffered a severe heart attack. He hastened back to the Savior and maintained a contented fidelity until, some months later, his spirit slipped quietly away into eternity.

Suffering can get our attention! David once wrote:

“In my **distress** I called upon Jehovah, and cried unto my God” (Psa. 18:6).

Suffering Can Provide Insight into Sin

Suffering can help us see sin in all of its hideous gruesomeness.

The Bible clearly teaches that this planet has been heir to suffering as a consequence of man’s sin. This principle is set forth clearly by Paul in his letter to the Roman saints. He affirmed that “through one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death through sin, so that death passed to all men, because all sinned” (Rom. 5:12).

At the beginning of human history, sin, in a manner of speaking, was “crouching at the door” (see Gen. 4:7). When grandmother Eve and her husband opened that door, horrible effects descended on their offspring (Gen. 3:22).

And so death—with all its attendant evils—entered the human environment as a result of man’s rebellion against his Creator.

When we suffer, it ought to be a sober reminder of how terrible sin is.

While we cannot escape the physical consequences of sin’s high price, we can refresh our souls in divine forgiveness. When that is done, life becomes immeasurably easier.

Suffering Clarifies What Is Truly Valuable

Suffering aids us in seeing the real worth of things.

When one passes through the experience of intense suffering and perhaps comes to the very threshold of death, the entire world can take on new meaning. The singing of the birds is more vivid than it ever has been. A fresh spring day makes the soul ecstatic. Family and friends take on a new preciousness.

Christopher Reeve, who starred as Superman in the movies, was paralyzed in an accident and discovered that in real life he was not as invincible as the character he portrayed. In interviews following his personal tragedy, Mr. Reeve commented that since being paralyzed, he had discovered a new zest for life.

Indeed, suffering can provide a sharper vision of our priorities. As the poet John Dryden expressed it:

“We, by our sufferings, learn to prize our bliss” (*Astraea Redux*).

He that hath an ear, let him hear what suffering whispers to the soul.

Suffering Sows the Seed of Compassion

Suffering prepares us to be compassionate to others.

There is an old adage that says, “Do not judge a man until you’ve walked a mile in his shoes.”

I suggest another proverb: “One cannot comfort effectively until he has lain in the bed of suffering.”

That may be a bit of an overstatement, but it contains a grain of truth. In the second chapter of Hebrews, the writer effectively argued that Jesus Christ, as our High Priest, is qualified to “succor” (ASV) or “aid” (NASV) those who are tempted.

How is that so? Hear him:

“For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted” (Heb. 2:18, NKJV).

The song lyric, “Are you weary? Are you heavyhearted? Tell it to Jesus; tell it to Jesus,” is wonderfully meaningful in light of this passage.

It has been said that the difference between “sympathy” (from the Greek *syn*, “with,” and *pathos*, “feeling”) and “empathy” (*en*, “in,” and *pathos*) is that in the former instance one “feels with” (i.e., has feelings of tenderness for) those who suffer, whereas in empathy one almost is able to get inside the friend who suffers—because the one doing the comforting **has been there!**

Suffering Makes Us Homesick

Suffering sharpens our awareness that this **earth is not a permanent home**.

Peter sought to encourage early Christians who were being persecuted not to despair. He reminded them that they were but “sojourners and pilgrims” upon this earth (1 Pet. 2:11).

The ancient patriarchs “confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” and so they looked for “a better country, that is a heavenly [one]” (Heb. 11:13-16).

Paul reminded us that “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us-ward” (Rom. 8:18).

It is not the will of God that men live upon this evil-plagued planet forever. We never will be “at home” until we are with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8), and suffering helps make us “homesick.”

Henry Ward Beecher once said:

“God washes the eyes by tears until they can behold the invisible land where tears shall come no more.”

Suffering Teaches Us How to Pray

Suffering enhances our ability to pray. Praying is an instinctive human response to severe hardship.

But **effective prayer** is a learned exercise.

On a certain occasion during his ministry, Jesus was praying. After he had finished, one of the disciples requested of him:

“Lord, teach us to pray, even as John also taught his disciples” (Lk. 11:1).

These Hebrew disciples had been praying for their entire lives. But they observed something in the intensity of Jesus’ prayers that sent them back to school.

With Calvary ever looming before him, Christ plumbed the depths of prayer. Note the following:

“And being in agony he prayed **more earnestly**; and his sweat became as it were great drops of blood falling down upon the ground” (Lk. 22:44).

A song suggests: “Pray when you’re happy; pray when in sorrow.” One should pray frequently, and in all moods.

Under the burden of suffering, however, one will learn how to pray as he never has prayed before.

Suffering Grooms the Soul for Eternity

Suffering tempers the soul and helps prepare it for eternity. Peter wrote:

[N]ow for a little while, if necessary, ye have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:6-7).

Just as precious metals are purified by the heat of a fire, so life’s trials in general and suffering for Christ in particular build strength into the soul.

Noble character does not happen by accident. Rather, it is built! Out of the fires of suffering, the human spirit may emerge as precious as gold and as strong as steel.

Suffering Engenders Nobility

Suffering nurtures the noblest virtues of which mankind is capable.

Think for a moment about the quality of courage. Civilizations universally perceive courage to be one of the prime traits of humanity. By way of contrast, cowardice is considered to be utterly reprehensible.

Courage may be defined as the ability to act rationally in the face of fear.

If, however, the human family were immune to hardship, danger, and suffering, there could be no facing it, hence, no courage.

When we sit down to a delicious dinner with friends and loved ones on a balmy autumn evening, no courage is needed.

Courage only arrives in the presence of danger. There are certain qualities that we simply cannot possess in the absence of hardship.

Ralph Sockman wrote:

Without danger there would be no adventure. Without friction our cars would not start and our spirits would not soar. Without tears, eyes would not shine with the richest expressions (1961, 66).

And what of “patience”? John Chrysostom (347-407 A.D.), one of the most influential figures among the “church fathers” of the post-apostolic period, described patience as “the mother of piety, fruit that never withers, a fortress that is never taken, a harbour that knows no storms” (as quoted in Barclay 1974, 145).

But could there ever be patience in the absence of difficulty?

Suffering Probes Our Character

Suffering separates the superficial from the stable.

Paul cautioned the Corinthian saints against building up the church superficially. Some folks are of the “wood, hay, [and] stubble” variety, while others exhibit those qualities of “gold, silver [and] costly stones” (1 Cor. 3:12-15). Saints of the latter category endure. Those of the former do not.











Why so? It is simply because the two groups are tested by fire (hardships), and that testing fire separates **quality** converts from those who really are not serious about their Christian commitment.

Jesus once spoke of those who receive the gospel impulsively, and, for a while endure. Eventually, though, “tribulation and persecution” arise, and rather quickly the superficial fade away (see Matt. 13:20-21).

And so, while no one actively seeks to suffer, honesty compels us to admit that hardships do have value—great value. Certainly, the existence of suffering is not a valid reason for rejecting the Creator.

[Note: This material is adapted from my book, *The Bible and Mental Health*.]

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Scripture References

1 John 4:8; Joshua 24:15; Isaiah 7:15; Job 6:13; 2 Corinthians 1:3; Romans 6:3; Psalm 18:6; Romans 5:12; Genesis 4:7; Genesis 3:22; Hebrews 2:18; 1 Peter 2:11; Hebrews 11:13-16; Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Luke 11:1; Luke 22:44; 1 Peter 1:6-7; 1 Corinthians 3:12-15; Matthew 13:20-21

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