**Suffering**

In one of the great treasuries of Christian blessings, Romans chapter eight, there is a word and concept that used to stick out like a sore thumb to me – suffering.

Romans 8:17

And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.

Why does God “ruin” the positives of Christ’s blessings by bringing up the negative possibility of suffering? The short answer is because the Bible reveals truth and reality, not fantasy.

As a young Christian I wanted to believe that after I gave my life to Christ I would live “happily ever after”. I forced my mind to read past sufferings in the Bible, hoping that if I loved God, He would shield me from all evil. I also thought that if I “believed God” my life would be blessed, and I would “run through the evil rain drops of the world without getting wet”. These thoughts were a nice illusion, but then one day reality struck. As Mike Tyson once said, “Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face”. Once evil hit me hard it caused me to open my eyes, question my immature assumptions and relook at scripture.

# Ecclesiastes 3:1-4

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

Here was my take on these verses based on my youthful fantasies. “I like the part about getting born in verse two, but don’t like the dying part. Sign me up for singing and dancing in verse four, but can I avoid weeping and mourning?” How wishful and unrealistic!

One of the reasons I believe that the Bible is true is because of its unblinking honesty. There are no escapist fantasies in it. The Bible clearly says that there will be both positive and negative times in life. It is inescapable and undeniable. Did the first man, Adam, have both ends of the spectrum? His oldest son killed his younger brother. Talk about suffering! How about Noah? He endured the degradation and destruction of all humanity besides his family. Yow! How about Abraham? He buried his father and wife and endured decades of failure until finally having the promised son. I could go on, but the point is obvious. “In this world you shall have tribulation” promised Jesus, showing that none of us are exempt. But blessedly, Jesus followed that promise with a second one, “But be of good cheer – I have overcome the world.” That victory can become ours through Christ, but to get to that victory, we must overcome the inescapably negative things spoken of in Ecclesiastes 3, not ignore them. How do we do that?

Romans 8:28

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

All things in life – the good and bad – work together for good to those who love God. Please note that the King James Version doesn’t say “God works all things together for good”, as if He brings terrible things to man to test him or teach life building lessons. The Greek texts don’t say that, despite some English translators inserting “God” in their versions to bolster that idea. That errant teaching says that God is behind every circumstance that happens to every person in order to test him or her and make them stronger. This idea is wrong on many fronts. First, “God is light and in Him is no darkness at all,” says 1 John 1:5. God does not use evil to teach. Only a sick, twisted mind would do that. Secondly, God made life perfect and man to have free will in the beginning. He is not behind every situation that developed later, whether good or bad. Since history began many individuals have made scads of choices that affect themselves and others in myriad ways – some good and some bad. God is not behind a hurricane, or a job loss, or cancer. God does not “give” people these things to supposedly make them better. These imperfections come from sinful decisions - some ancient and some recent. What God does is help man when he turns to Him in whatever situation he finds himself.

Ps 34:19

Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the Lord delivereth him out of them all.

Notice it doesn’t say “Nonexistent are the afflictions of the righteous”. So sometimes our kids are going to do things we hate and mankind around us will be degraded. Natural disasters might show up, jobs might come and go, and sickness might also drop by.

Another wrong assumption that I needed to overcome was the thought that if I experienced pain or suffering it was because I was out of fellowship with God and (therefore) my fault. This idea sent me off on many rabbit trails of self-recrimination, like… “Why?” “What did I do wrong?” “God, I’m so sorry for whatever I did. Please turn this situation around!”

If it was true that pain and suffering automatically meant that the afflicted was out of alignment with God, the above verse would say, “Many are the afflictions of the unrighteousness.” Think about it. The challenges of life come to saint and sinner alike.

Now, I’m not saying “Suffering is normal – learn to live with it!” I’m saying not to condemn yourself because of it. I’m also saying that despite “many afflictions”, one truth stands firm, “the Lord delivers us out of them all”! Praise God! When does that happen? The answer is “sooner and/or later”. When Christ returns, we get delivered from all our flesh’s weakness and the sinful world. That is the deliverance “later”.

Phil 3: 20, 21

For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ:

Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.

What a day that will be! A new body with no weakness and limits like his. The “many afflictions” of the present world will be a distant memory then, perhaps like a bad dream. What about deliverance “sooner”? That’s part of what Romans 8:17 is describing. Because we are identified with Christ and “joint heirs”, we “suffer with him”. What does that mean?

Jesus suffered for our sins, taking the full punishment on himself, suffering in our stead. When he rose again after paying in full for our sins, he gave us freedom and life. Do we now suffer for sin, as he did? No, Jesus did that already – once for all time. Nonetheless, the present evil world began by Adam’s sin and expanded by Satan’s rule still surrounds and afflicts us. Therefore, “many are the afflictions of the righteous”. We don’t suffer “instead of” sin like Jesus did. We suffer “because of” sin – because of Adam’s sin, our great grandfather’s, our employer’s, our governmental leader’s, and our own sin. We get afflicted from many directions. This continues until Christ comes from heaven, snatching us away and giving us a new body. Until then we look to God for guidance and strength for deliverance now.

How does that work? In Romans chapter 5 we learned:

Romans 5: 1-4

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ:

By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience;

And patience, experience; and experience, hope:

Because we are justified, we have access to God into this grace wherein we stand. We rejoice (the Greek word means “to speak out loud with confidence”) in hope. What do we say? “Christ is coming back!… We will get new bodies!… God’s family shall finally come together!”. We also glory (the same word meaning “to speak out loud with confidence”) amid pressure (affliction, tribulation) because we know that pressure works out patience, and patience works out results. How does all this work?

Let’s say a saint loses their job. Because they are justified and have access, they go into God’s throne room and speak out loud with confidence about the future. They praise God. They confess their love for Him in thankfulness. Do they have a job yet? Probably not. So, it’s time to speak out loud in a different way amid pressure. The conversation could go something like this. “God, you see that the leadership of my company made some bad decisions and it’s cost me my job. I have some money in the bank but certainly not enough to pay off the house and retire on. I need more money, so I need a job. My kids are looking at me and have expectations, as does my spouse and family. What am I going to do? Would you please get me another job?” What happens next? Perhaps there comes some guidance towards talking with someone, or going to a website, or just a knowing that Someone who loves you is listening. The saint patiently prays and trusts God and soon there is an open door and answered prayer.

I remember when this scenario happened to me. When I needed a job, I regularly prayed to God and got ideas, but I thought some were silly and rejected them. After a while, the money got seriously short and the house payment beckoned. It got down to one piece of bread and peanut butter, but no jelly. With a two-year-old daughter, no food was not an option. I went to a respected Christian brother and discussed my frustration. He gave me a few dollars and some God-inspired advice, “Take the first job you can.” I did. It was the dumbest job I ever took. It was selling pots and pans and billiard cues out of my car on the street! The last professional job I had before this was a mid-level manager at the largest franchisee in the state. Now I was street hustling! I kept doing it because it produced cash daily which is what I needed. Within a few months I became an independent businessman branching off to car stereo equipment. The “street hustle” grew into an electronics distribution business that fed my growing family for years.

Bad circumstances and pressure make you do things you wouldn’t normally do – which many times is exactly what you should do. One thing I’ve learned about humans through the years is this - people will usually change only when they must. When the pain of staying the same hurts more than the pain to change, then change happens.

Sometimes when we pray, the answer is so far outside our comfort zone, we dismiss it. The reason it takes God so long to answer our prayer, isn’t God’s fault. It’s us – we’re not ready to listen to the answer and do what it entails. That’s where patience comes in. We must stay in God’s presence regularly and keep trusting Him. Sometimes after getting pressed and suffering a bit, we become open to other options previously thought wrong. It’s only after staying with God through the journey of trust that we see deliverance and “all things work together for good” because we loved God and were patient, sticking with Him.

So, speaking out loud with God amid pressure works out patience; and patience works out results. When I think about it, I must admit that suffering many times has been an important part of my deliverance journeys. It made me lose myself – my preconditions, my fears, my pride, my wrong thinking, my comfort zone and immaturity.

Eccles 7:2-4

It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart.

Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better.

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

I’m going to ask you a hard, personal question. Have you ever watched someone die? I have and it changes you. Recently I lost both my mom and dad. I held their hands when they passed away. One day they are alive with thoughts and desires and then they were gone. Just an empty body. I saw them from their thirties until they were almost ninety. I saw their triumphs and tragedies, their dramas and follies. Gone. All of it with Christ now.

The next thoughts I had were of my own life. I realized “the end of all men”. Suddenly, the importance of who wins the game of thrones evaporates. All the zeros on the computer screen on the bank website shrinks in significance. You realize that there is an invisible expiration date on you that only God knows and you don’t but it’s still coming as sure as the sun rises. It makes you rearrange priorities and think in terms of the eternal. It changes your heart.

Look at the three verses above. The word heart is used four times. Suffering makes your heart better. It focuses the mind and strengthens yet softens the heart. The other option is to anesthetize yourself through drinking, foolish laughter and fantasy to hide from the uncomfortable truth that the clock is ticking on our remaining seconds on this sphere. And for many the phrase “the uncomfortable truth that the clock is ticking” is too soft. For many it’s terrifying. They are in a self-induced sleepwalk, anesthetizing themselves in varied ways to shield themselves from the fact of their awful mortality, because they have never accepted Christ. To them death means plunging into a terrifying, dark abyss.

Those of us who are Christians, have “laid hold on eternal life”. The temporal pleasures and pains of this life have lost a lot of their luster after being compared to eternity. Those of us that have endured pressure and suffered, have learned that God is faithful and will come through – always. I heard a quote from famed Bible teacher Chuck Swindoll who said, “I don’t usually trust someone unless they’ve suffered a little.” That sounds strange until you think about it. Those who have never suffered are like those Mike Tyson says have untested plans. Chuck Swindoll prefers to put his trust in those who have been hit, adjusted their plans scripturally, stood back up and endured in the contest.

Is suffering an integral part of spiritual growth?

1 Pet 5:10 Revised English Version

[And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace who called you to his everlasting glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.](https://www.revisedenglishversion.com/1-Peter/chapter5/10)

Yes, it seems it is. The scripture says that God can provide four things through a period of suffering – restoration, confirmation, strength and establishment. All these qualities are the hallmarks of maturity. By the way, it’s not like we must go out of our way to find circumstances in which we are pressed and suffer. Regrettably, they find us. The great realization is that in these circumstances we can see God work and ourselves grow. Is this reality unique to the Christian Church?

Heb. 5:8,9

Though he [Jesus] were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered;

And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him;

Jesus had to learn just as we do. He learned to obey God “by the things which he suffered”. This allowed him to become “perfect” or (the Greek word means) “mature”. Remember, he started out as a baby and had to learn… everything, including how to obey and trust God, just as we do. And – amazingly – suffering was an important part of that maturity process. What things did Jesus suffer? Here are three things that I believe were crucial to his growth. Although not specifically revealed, I believe these aspects of Jesus’ early life fit in the context of the scriptures and Jesus’s later ministry.

1. His stepfather’s death. Here is some background info taken from compellingtruth.org.

Joseph is mentioned at numerous times during the early childhood of Jesus but is last mentioned when Jesus was twelve years old. At that age, Jesus had stayed behind at the temple while His parents searched for Him for three days ([Luke 2:41-50](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%202.41-50)).  
  
Since Joseph is not mentioned during the public ministry of Jesus, most scholars assume Joseph died sometime between the twelve-year-old temple account (approximately 8-12 A.D.) and when Jesus began His public ministry around 27-29 A.D. at "about thirty years of age" ([Luke 3:23](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%203.23)). For example, early in His ministry, Jesus is noted at a family wedding where Mary is mentioned, but not Joseph ([John 2:1-12](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/John%202.1-12)).  
  
Later during the ministry of Jesus, some asked, "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us?" ([Matthew 13:55-56](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2013.55-56)). Joseph also had a son named Joseph, yet Mary's husband Joseph was not mentioned by name. This could possibly be because Joseph had already passed away and was no longer attending the local synagogue.  
  
Further support for this interpretation is found at the cross of Jesus. In [John 19:26-27](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/John%2019.26-27), Jesus commanded the apostle John to care for His mother Mary. This certainly would not have taken place if Joseph had still been alive. The natural conclusion is that Joseph had died before the public ministry of Jesus began.  
  
Some have suggested that Joseph lived at least until the late teenage years of Jesus, teaching Jesus carpentry until He was able to care for His family. While this is uncertain, the suggestion is likely, meaning Joseph likely passed away when Jesus was between His late teens and late twenties. (The preceding was taken from compellingtruth.org)

So, let’s say Jesus was 20 when his stepfather passed away at approximately 40 years old. I’m sure this was extremely tough on Jesus because Joseph was an awesome man and believer. How do we know this? Because the Bible says so.

[Matthew 1:18-25](http://www.biblica.com/en-us/bible/online-bible/niv/matthew/1/) Right before his wedding, Joseph finds out Mary is pregnant, a cataclysmic sin and social disaster at that time. Does he stone her and trash her for disgracing God and ruining his life? No, he plans to put her away secretly until he gets a visit from an angel telling him the unthinkable – Mary is pregnant with God’s baby and he’s the savior! God says to Joseph, “Marry the girl, raise the savior and call him Jesus.” How’s that for a kick in the head for a 20-year-old? And Joseph does it!! But wait there’s more!

Matt 2:1-14 Jesus was born in Bethlehem as Joseph got his pregnant wife to a manger just in time. Shepherds come with wide-eyed stories of angels prophesying. They go to the temple to perform the law of the firstborn and encounter two saints who prophesy who Jesus is. The new family goes back home, and Magi show up with a caravan to see the one foretold by Daniel. They give the family gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Right afterward God tells Joseph to take the family and flee to Egypt because the king will try to kill all boys Jesus’ age. In obedience to God, Joseph goes to a foreign county where he has no carpentry business and he doesn’t speak the language in the middle of the night! How many of us would do that? Very few, if any. How did they eat? The Magi’s gifts were a good nest egg to get started in Egypt.

Matt 2:19-23 In a few years the murderous king dies and God tells Joseph to go back to Israel. By then it’s probably more than Jesus, Mary and Joseph. He probably has a thriving carpentry business going. God says, “Time to go!” So, the young family packs it all up and goes to Judea, where his family roots were. Joseph realized that although his family is there, the new king was there too and was as dangerous as the last one. God says to go north to Nazareth to protect Jesus. So, Joseph must start over from scratch professionally again, with no referrals except from Egypt, far away. By then he was probably down to selling the Myrrh!

Luke 2:41-52 When Jesus was 12 years old they went to the temple for a feast day. By this time, Joseph and Mary have a tassel of kids and probably traveled with other families. Jesus decided to launch his ministry of saving the world and went into the temple, hearing the religious PhD’s and asking them questions. They were amazed at the precocious pre-teen’s understanding and answers. His parents left for home and after three days realized Jesus wasn’t with the Nazarene caravan. They went back and found Jesus blowing the PhD’s minds.

Luke 2:48-51

And when they saw him, they were amazed: and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing.

And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?

And they understood not the saying which he spake unto them.

And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them: but his mother kept all these sayings in her heart.

Do you see the phrase, “and was subject unto them”? One thing you see later in the gospels is that Jesus didn’t suffer fools gladly, of which the religious leaders qualified. He called them out as hypocrites, never trusting them. As John 2:24,25 says, he knew what was in them. Therefore, he never subjected himself to them. He also never subjected himself to either Roman governor – Herod or Pilate. Yet he subjected himself to his parents. Why? Because they earned his respect and he knew what was in them – rock solid believing gold. Find another man in the Bible as willing to turn his life upside down when he gets revelation like Joseph. Good luck. He did it when he was single, married and even with a large family and business. He was a rock. Not only that but consider how Jesus learned about God’s word and life. Since Jesus never got the spirit until he started his ministry, he learned most of what he knew about God from his stepdad, mom and the synagogue. Perhaps there was “angel summer school”, but overall, he was taught by his parents. Consider what kind of man and woman God trusted to raise His only begotten son. They were of such sterling character that Jesus, who - even at twelve years old and who could run rings around the religious leaders of that time - was subject to Joseph and Mary.

When Joseph died, it must have crushed Jesus. To see the finest man he had ever known, get weak and die, must have been heart breaking. He probably walked around in a daze. But not for too long because Joseph’s death was the beginning of his troubles.

2. At least nine mouths to feed.

Matt. 13:55-56

Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us?"

Jesus had 4 brothers and at least 3 sisters. When Joseph passed away, the oldest son, Jesus, became responsible for the family. He now had at least nine mouths to feed. How much pressure is that for a 20-year-old? Let’s say, “A lot.” What if he’s unable to do it? Then according to the law, the members of the family are individually or in groups sold into slavery. By now the gold, frankincense and myrrh are gone. It’s sink or swim time.

If Joseph was in the middle of building a house when he died, Jesus had to finish it – if nine people were to eat. Assisting a job and being responsible for it are as different as night and day. Jesus had to run the crew (of brothers! Always interesting!). Jesus had to do the bidding, advertising, bookkeeping, taxes, payroll, inventory, etc. At 20 years old!

Now think about what Jesus went through. He had to deal with his own profound grief, losing his stepdad, the finest man he ever knew, who taught him so much. Then he had to comfort his mom - a widow with at least 8 kids. Then he had to comfort his siblings. Then he had to run a business and fulfill all his stepdad’s commitments. If he fails, he gets to pick which sibling goes to the slave auction first.

Talk about suffering! We know Jesus was smart (probably “scary smart”), but smarts has little to do with dealing with these situations. It’s pressure and pain followed by agony and fear.

How did Jesus do? Very well. We know this because almost a decade later when Matt. 13:55-56 was recorded, it didn’t say…

Matt. 13:55-56 The “Ladieu Catastrophic Version”.

Is not this the carpenter's son who went bankrupt? Is not his mother called Mary, the depressed alcoholic? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and the slaves, Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us, except the one who became a slave?"

I apologize for being flippant with the scriptures, but this is what these people would have said if Jesus would have failed his “suffering season”. The reason why the family was intact and well-known years later was because Jesus stood tall and trusted God, despite the awful situation. He did what Romans 5 declared. He went to God and patiently did what the scriptures and God told him to do. He saw the results and deliverance. Perhaps he started his ministry when one of the brothers was able to take over the business so he could start his second career – the redemption of mankind!

3. No one ever understood him. No one. Except God.

Luke 2:48-50

And when they saw him, they were amazed: and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing.

And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?

And they understood not the saying which he spake unto them.

Everybody likes to be loved, appreciated and understood - including Jesus. He never was. Even his mom and step-dad – as tremendous as they were – never understood the depth of what God called him to do. His siblings were terrific too. (Two of them later became apostles and wrote books in the Bible – James and Jude.) Yet for years they had no clue.

Mark 3:21 Revised English Version

[And when those who were close to him heard it, they set out to take custody of him, for they said, “He is out of his mind.”](https://www.revisedenglishversion.com/Mark/chapter3/21)

When Jesus started his ministry and had success and large crowds, his family thought he was literally crazy, trying to stage an intervention. Not only did they not understand his divine calling, they opposed it. They probably wanted him back running the construction business again, and who could blame them? I’m sure the profit took a large dip after Jesus’s exit.

Now, put yourself in Jesus shoes. All his life he’s told he is the promised one. At twelve years old he starts talking to the religious leaders in the temple and tries to launch his ministry to redeem the world … at 12 years old! He is committed, focused and (most importantly) God’s only begotten son! So… let’s go! Mom and stepdad say, “No chance, short pants! Come home. You have a lot to learn.” So, he reluctantly does. I’m sure he’s thinking, “I’m not going to be any more God’s son in a year or two than I am today! What are we waiting for?” Nonetheless he has the utmost respect for his parents, so he obeys, goes home and learns many things. I’ll bet he thinks at times, “When are we going to get ‘redeeming’? The world needs some serious help!” But he learns about carpentry, doing a business, accountability, dealing with people, helping his younger brothers learn the trade, etc. Everybody looks at him like he’s just an average person, the same as anyone else, when nothing could be further from the truth. “When will my difference matter? Were the prophesies and angel messages my parents told me about when I was a little kid right?” he is tempted to wonder.

One day his stepdad dies. It’s the worst day ever. His mom, usually a rock, is lost. His brothers and sisters are frightened about the future. Jesus himself is confused that his dad, the one great constant in his life is gone. Why? What do we do now? How do we go on? Jesus realizes that there’s only one way he can be successful, and that’s with God. He goes to his Father and gets comfort, strength, and guidance for the road ahead. God guides him through the family situation and business responsibilities – at 20 years old! In the future Jesus would carry the world. First, he would learn to carry his family. God showed him as he learned obedience through the things that he suffered. He learned that no man, no religious leader, or king, or family member could take the place of God. He learned that no matter the situation and circumstances, God could pull you through if you loved Him, trusted Him and continued with patience. He kept growing and learning until one day it was time to do what he was called to do. He graduated from the minor leagues to the major leagues. From his physical family to God’s spiritual family. He was tempted in all ways like we have been, yet without sin. And he became a mature believer who through suffering, was restored, confirmed, strengthened, and established as the Savior of mankind, the Promised One.

As a young man, Jesus had a plan and got hit. He adjusted his plan and continued with God. He grew mature, unbowed by suffering and came through the challenge victorious. So when challenges later came up in his ministry – John the Baptist is murdered, his family tries to seize him, he is betrayed by the ministry treasurer - he already knows who God is and was not about to quit trusting His call on his life, or doubt God’s ability to help him emerge victorious.

Romans 8:17

And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.

This is why God had Paul write about suffering in the middle of Romans 8. Because in an imperfect world we will still have to deal with it. And just like Jesus did amid his suffering, if we grow close to God and gain comfort, strength and guidance, God will see us through our suffering as we patiently do His will and emerge victorious. We are joint heirs with Christ in suffering, growing spiritually and one day being glorified together. God bless you.