



### **Week 1: Surprised by suffering?**

*1 Pet 4:12 "Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you." (NLT)*

Suffering has a way of catching us off guard. It takes us out of the realm of the abstract and into the realm of reality. When pain and suffering touches us, or our loved ones, difficult questions frequently haunt us: Why? Why now? Why did God allow this to happen?

It is during times of suffering that the integrity of God's goodness weighs heavily on our minds. Faith engages our emotions in a wrestling match, pitting reality against our understanding of God. Often, there seems to be no logical answer to help us make sense of suffering. Is pain part of the human condition, and why are we surprised by suffering? What does Scripture teach us about it? And, does suffering have a purpose? These questions are often silently whispered or grappled with during 'the dark night of the soul' but, fearing rejection, rarely voiced. To top it off, we seldom hear sermons on the topic, or – because of our human nature – we have chosen to believe that being a Christian will guarantee freedom from suffering.



Maybe you have been in such a furnace, wrestled with some of these questions, or are supporting someone who is going through tribulations. These questions, and the topic as a whole, is often neglected, difficult to answer but urgently needs to be explored and understood from a Biblical perspective.

In this devotional series we will explore God's purposes amid suffering and contemplate how trust and assurance in God can transform suffering into something worthwhile.

**Reflection:** *How has your perception of suffering influenced your understanding and reactions towards difficult times you, or others, have faced?*

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## **Week 2: If God is all-powerful, why does He not prevent suffering? [Part 1 on the suffering of Job]**

*Job 42:5 "I have heard about You before, but now I have seen You with my own eyes." (NLT)*

When we understand a little bit more about God's sovereignty, we can begin to recognise that pain and suffering can have a purpose. To explore this topic, we turn to one of the oldest books in the Bible, Job, which deals specifically with the subject.

In the opening words of Chapter 1 we are introduced to a man who was "blameless", "feared God" and "turned from evil". We immediately understand from this that the suffering which would follow was not a punishment for some measure of ungodliness. His innocence aggravates the dilemma of suffering and causes us to deeply identify with Job.



Satan enters the picture and requests God's permission to attack Job. First, he takes his wealth and family, and then – when Job does not curse God as a result of his loss – Satan argues that Job's afflictions were not enough. Satan then receives permission from God to inflict disease upon Job, but prohibits that Satan touch his life.

Job's story – up to this point – confronts us with questions about God's sovereignty and goodness. Can He do something to change the circumstances, but won't? Or, does He want to change the circumstances, but can't?

**Reflection:** *Denying God's power, or denying His goodness, are sometimes offered as solutions to the problem of suffering. Why are each of these opinions incorrect?*

Next week we will continue with Job's story and the question of God's sovereignty amid suffering.

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### **Week 3: If God is all-powerful, why does He not prevent suffering? Continued... [Part 2 on the suffering of Job]**

Job was righteous, but lost everything, and suffered a direct attack on his health. Up until that moment, Job had chosen to accept that God had given and had taken away. But then suffering takes its toll, and one of the darkest chapters in the Bible follows. Job ends up cursing the day he was born and poses some of those *why* questions to God. Finally, after Job's friends exhaust themselves – unable to explain God's ways, while insinuating that Job's suffering was a result of unconfessed sin – God responds to Job's questions with humbling questions of His own, without ever explaining the reason for the suffering.



He starts by asking Job where he was when He laid the foundation of the earth, or defined the boundaries of the sea? Could Job command the dawn to rise; did he know where the gazelle lay down to give birth, or had he given strength to the horse? God never gave Job an explanation for his suffering, but through His questions to Job He confirmed His sovereignty and goodness and His questions successfully created a contrast between God and man. God's questions exalt His majesty, while providing Job with the proper perspective and reveals just how much Job needs to know before he could even attempt to understand the concept of

suffering. The majesty of God helps Job understand how small he is as a creature and confirms that God is in control. In fact, God is basically asking Job [*your name*]: "Can you trust me, even if you don't know the answer to your question/s?"

From Job's story we learn that God is not the author of evil, but He is in control, and we can place our trust in our powerful and sovereign God who is able to turn what was planned for evil, into good (Gen 50: 20 and Rom 8: 28).

**Reflection:** *How would you console someone who is going through a time of suffering by using the truth of God's sovereignty?*

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#### **Week 4: Is God paying attention when we suffer?**

*Isaiah 43:2 "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when you go through the rivers of difficulty, you will not drown." (NLT)*

The Bible is filled with the history of people suffering and God responding to them in various ways. Early in Genesis we meet Hagar, who cried out in the wilderness on two occasions and was met by the Lord to such an extent that she called Him, "The One who sees". In Exodus we read of a nation that was forged during their time of tribulation in Egypt. They cried out to the Lord, He heard, and set them free. These stories reveal God's involvement and intervention during suffering, and most probably represents our picture of what we expect God to do when we suffer – namely deliver us from suffering.



In Job's story we found that Job questioned God's sovereignty during his suffering, but never received the answer he hoped for. However, the absence of answers to his 'why' questions does not imply that God is not aware of his suffering. Neither did God reprimand Job for asking these questions. Instead, through humbling questions of His own, Job was brought to a place of increased faith and acceptance that God was in control.

David declares in Ps 23 that he *will fear no evil* as he walks through the sunless valley of the shadow of death – not because there is no evil – but because we live in a broken and fallen world where evil exists. The prospect of difficulties did not deter David because the Lord promised to be right alongside him.

As followers of Jesus, we should not be surprised by suffering (John 16:33), but we should rest in the knowledge that God is sovereign, and He promises that He will never leave us nor forsake us.

**Reflection:** *How does knowing that God – living in you, as a believer, through His Holy Spirit – change the way you think about suffering? Do you think He can forget about your suffering? Can you be separated from Him when you go through difficulties?*

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## **Week 5: The mystery of suffering**

*1 John 4:10 "In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." (NLT)*



Suffering is often considered a mystery, one which very few of us are capable of plumbing. In the Christian faith it can be likened to other similar concepts, where complete understanding eludes us, such as the Trinity, ascension and everlasting life. The mere idea of reconciling a loving God with the human experience of suffering is a mystery, but it also contains a life-giving truth. One that needs to be understood against the backdrop of the cross – where the seeming contradiction of suffering and love meets.

The cross is the best and the worst thing that has ever happened, in the history of mankind. When Christ laid down His life for us, we see the love of God not as a sentiment, but as a willed and relentless love that desired nothing but the best for us. The will of God is therefore love, and love suffered.

However, at the cross we not only see His love suffering for our good, but it was also a sacrifice. Christ was willing to become a human (a sacrifice) and, in obedience, took upon Himself our grief, sins, and suffering (sacrifice on the cross). Love in this context is therefore bound to a sacrifice, and that is what Jesus was doing on the cross – giving His life for yours.

If God was therefore working out His love for us through the suffering on the cross, then we can begin to grasp that suffering can have a purpose. Although we will not always have complete understanding of suffering, faith in the character of God – whose love was revealed and suffered on the cross – enables us to believe that He has a purpose with suffering and can therefore be trusted.

**Reflection:** *How does the cross shed light on the mystery of suffering?*

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## **Week 6: Our definition of faith**

*Mark 14:36 "Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will." (NASB)*

Suffering really gets tough when our prayers are not answered in the way we believed they would be answered. What happens to our faith when this happens? Does it get shaken when the world says that a God of love will not allow suffering and hardship? Do we lose faith because our definition of answered prayers implies immediate relief from all our hardships? Do we see prayer as a 'relational transaction' only – a 'divine currency' that we pay in order to receive whatever we ask in prayer?

From the book of Job, we learn that trust, and therefore faith, must be sought in the character of God Himself. Daniel was such a man, whose faith rested in the character of God, and not in what God



could do for him. Consider Jesus when He prayed three times in the garden of Gethsemane, pleading with His Father to let the cup of suffering pass Him by. Of all people in this world, surely God would concede to His beloved Son's request. But Jesus ends His prayer: "Not what I want, but what You will." Why does Jesus end His prayer in this way? Because He had absolute faith in the character and will of His Father.

Faith allows us to admit that while we do not understand everything, we can trust God, and that suffering can have a purpose. If our faith rests entirely on the idea of "heaven here on earth", then that kind of faith will be demolished when the storms of life hit us. If, however, our faith rests on the character of Him who is the eternal *I am*, then that kind of faith will endure.

**Reflection:** Where is Jesus placing His finger in your life today – unanswered prayers, or deep resentment towards Him when things happened differently to what you expected, or prayed for?

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## **Week 7: How then shall we pray when suffering comes our way?**

*Luke 18:1 "...pray, and [do] not give up (faint, lose heart)." (Amp)*



What are we to do with the problem of suffering? What do we say to a friend when they have been praying faithfully for an extended time, but have seen no change? Should they pray and continue to plead to have it removed, even if heaven seems silent? Should they stop praying and accept the fact that they might never receive an answer as to the purpose of the pain, nor see it resolved in the way they prayed for?

Scripture teaches us that prayer can make a real difference. Consider Hezekiah's prayer for extension for his life (Is 38), or the church's pleas for Peter's release (Acts 12: 1-19).

But, Scripture also makes it clear that our petitions can go unanswered. Paul made repeated requests to have the "thorn in his flesh removed" (2 Cor 12:7 – 10), and God answered - but not in the way Paul expected. Some of the Biblical heroes, whose prayers and faith "subdued kingdoms" and "closed the mouths of lions", are in stark contrast to those whose petitions seem to have gone unanswered, where they were "mocked, scourged, imprisoned, stoned...and slain with the sword" (Heb 13). Maybe their unanswered prayers – yet unwavering faith – is what we need to see.

Prayer is not always about the results, but about a relationship. The Lord desires us to interact with Him, much like Jacob wrestled with the 'angel of the Lord', so that we may know and trust Him more. In the meantime, there is nothing wrong with being honest about your pain...David poured out his heart to God in the Psalms, and Job expressed his anguish and questions amid his suffering. The Lord does not expect us to cover-up our pain with a plastic smile, but desires that we continue "to pray, and not give up (faint, lose heart)."

**Reflection:** Do you think you can find a balance between praying in faith, yet leaving the matter open to God's will?

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## Week 8: How long, oh Lord?

*Revelation 2:10b "You will be persecuted for 'ten days'. Remain faithful even when facing death, and you will be given the crown of life." (NLT)*

In this week's devotion I would like to share a moment from a time of hardship in my life, while we were hostages in Yemen. A couple of weeks into the ordeal, our main question to the Lord turned from "Why Lord?" to "How long will this continue, Lord?" We just wanted the assurance that there would be an end to all the pain and heartache because the trauma dragged on, with no end in sight. Hope for a resolution had evaporated like rain in a scorched desert, and it seemed as if the Lord was not answering our most urgent prayers. Our thoughts turned to David's cries in the Psalms, and Jeremiah's lament, and these deeply resonated with us. It consoled us to know that others had felt the same during their tribulations. However, the niggling question of 'time' remained...



One day, the Lord reminded us of a Bible study from Revelation 2:10, that we had done as a family, literally days before our kidnapping. Initially, we grabbed hold of the 'ten days' in a literal sense – but, ten days from the day of our kidnapping, came and went. We prayed anxiously that our ordeal would not last another ten years. Suddenly, we recalled what the Bible study had focussed on: ten days suggested a 'measured' time and had nothing to do with physical days or hours.

Understanding that our hardship had a set time limit comforted us more than knowing what the end date of our ordeal would be. It assured us that God was still in control, and that although Satan desired to test the followers of Christ (Lk 22:31 – 34), God would not allow it to continue indefinitely. There were parameters – as we saw in the book of Job – when God told Satan he was not allowed to touch Job's life. In the same way, our suffering would have a time limit.

**Reflection:** Have you perhaps misunderstood God's answer to your prayers? Or maybe an aspect thereof?

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## Week 9: What should we do in the midst of suffering?



*Ps 55:23 "Cast you burdens on the Lord and He will sustain you. He will never permit the righteous to be moved" (NIV)*

The ability to trust God in the midst of personal suffering, especially when God does not answer our prayers, is something that Christians contend with everywhere. Despair, depression, exhaustion and even cynicism can set in and distract us from running the race with endurance. There is no recipe when it comes to handling suffering, and I can only briefly share scriptures which were pivotal during my season of difficulties.

In Ps 55:23 the word 'cast' suggests an action by the person carrying the burden. But the Hebrew also describes it as a flower being blown away from its plant by the wind – almost like a dandelion in the wind. This vivid picture demonstrates that it is not you who is doing the casting, but you should expose yourself to the wind and allow it to blow the burden from you. This relates to Jesus's teaching in John 3:8 where He says that the wind blows where it wishes...and so it is with everyone born of the Spirit. Here the Holy Spirit is compared to the wind – which we cannot control – but to which we should expose ourselves and allow Him to carry away our burdens.

Ps 51:17 speaks of a "broken spirit", "contrite heart" and "thanksgiving as a sacrifice", all being vital components during a season of suffering. Although loss and devastation during suffering are realities, the fact that thanksgiving as a sacrifice forms part of this scripture speaks volumes. In the midst of suffering, or in the aftermath thereof, thanksgiving feels like the last thing on one's mind, but giving thanks during trying times can truly become a sweet-smelling sacrifice unto Him.

**Reflection:** How can a 'broken spirit', 'contrite heart', and 'thanksgiving' be regarded as sacrifices as mentioned in Psalm 51:17? How do such things benefit God? How do they benefit us?

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## Week 10: Job's friends

*Rom 12:15: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep [sharing others' grief]" (Amp)*

Over the past couple of weeks, we have briefly touched on the mystery of suffering, and the sovereignty of God. Maybe you have not only been the one that suffered but have been a friend of someone going through a difficult time and have wrestled with a response or how to support during such times. Anyone who has spent time with a suffering friend knows it is hard to remain alongside without trying to give answers. Our first reaction is to investigate what went wrong (like Job's friends did) and find a solution. We would rather give a reason for suffering, even if it is wrong than accept that there is a mystery at the heart of suffering. Job's friends yielded to this temptation, and it is quite possible for us to fall into the same trap.



Consider for a moment how much harm well-meaning Christians have caused by giving a quick answer to suffering? Answers such as: "Just have faith, then God will take away the suffering", or "God will never send more adversity than you can handle". How could we possibly know the reason for anyone's suffering? How could we know all of God's ways? Ps 139:6 makes it clear that God's ways are often a mystery beyond our understanding.

Maybe one way we could provide support to a suffering friend is by admitting: "I don't know the reason for your suffering." And by committing to remain alongside our suffering friend, to be a tangible expression of God's compassion in the darkest chapters of their lives.

**Reflection:** Has someone else's suffering ever been used by God to teach you something in your own life?

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