

a lifetime
of wisdom

*embracing
the way
God
heals you*

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9

Why Would He Say No?

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It has been three weeks now, and nothing has changed. My body still hasn't got the message.

I give the mental command to my fingers and toes. *Move!* And there's nothing. Nothing at all. Okay, so it will be a gradual change. I can handle that. I'll wake up in the morning and feel the tiniest tingle, a feather-brush across my little finger. Or I'll make a small, small movement of one of my toes—maybe just a thirty-second of an inch. Just a fraction of an inch would be the best thing in the whole world! It would mean a beginning . . . a baby's step . . . an ant's step . . . toward healing.

But for right now, it's the hard work of believing that it's already done. *I'm trying so hard to believe.* Trying so hard to hang onto faith with everything in me. But what if it's not enough? What if I'm not believing hard enough? What if I've allowed the shadow of a doubt? Will that nullify everything?

I had such hopes! (There I go, talking in the past tense, as if healing won't happen. Maybe I've lost faith already.)

A group of us went to an old, picturesque country church with

a steeple, not far from home. Friends, family, church leaders, elders, pastors. I had asked them all to come to pray for my healing, and they did. Almost everyone.

We began by reading Scripture out loud—some reading from the New Testament, some reading from the Old. God honors His own Word, right? That’s what I’ve always heard.

Then, as the summer rain beat down on the church roof, some read specific promises from the Bible about healing. And they seem so clear!

Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up.

That’s right out of the book of James (5:14–15). Others read the stories of those who were healed—like the paralytic man in the book of Mark. Jesus said, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home” (2:11). And he did! Just like that.

After we read, they anointed my head with olive oil. Then how we prayed! Hands of many on my head, my shoulders. Such fervent prayer, with tears. Such faith in that room. We asked God to glorify Himself by allowing me to walk again. And I’m telling you, we believed it would happen.

So why can't I move? Why am I still in this wheelchair? Oh Lord, didn't You hear us? Did I do it all wrong? Don't You care? I do believe—help my unbelief!

I didn’t get right up out of the wheelchair. But that was okay. The Bible says of the ten lepers, “*As they went, they were cleansed*” (Luke 17:14). So it didn’t have to be right then.

Leaving the little church with my prayer team, I felt humbled by it all. How wonderful that God had seen me in my distress and heard the cry of my heart. Exiting through the front door, it was

as if heaven was giving us a glorious amen. The rain had stopped, the parking lot was flooded with golden light, the puddles molten gold, and a majestic rainbow burned across the sky in the misty distance.

As the car drove away, I kept saying, “Thank You, Lord! Thank You, Lord,” over and over. I knew it had already begun. The feeling would return. The strength would come. I would soar on wings of eagles. I would run and not grow weary, walk and not faint.

Even though nothing had happened (yet), I kept that secret little glow of joy and gratitude alive in my heart all through the evening. I woke up the next morning with strong expectation. This would be the day! Or then again . . . maybe tomorrow.

But now the days have come and gone. It’s been two weeks, and there’s nothing.

I keep fighting off this thought that tries to take over my emotions. *There must be something wrong with me. There must be sin in my life. I must not be believing hard enough.*

But I *know* I had faith. I even called some of my friends the week before the healing service and said, “Watch for me standing on your doorstep soon. I’m going to be healed!”

Still . . . it has to be me. It has to be something wrong with me.

FORTY YEARS LATER

I remember those days so well.

To be healed of suffering is to be happy.

This line of thinking is the path I took in those early weeks and months of dealing with my paralysis.

I tried to imagine what He was thinking. If God were God—I was convinced He was all powerful and loving—He had to be as anxious to relieve my pain as I was. A heavenly Father had to weep over me as my daddy often did, standing by my bedside, white-knuckling the guardrail. I was one of God’s children, and God would never do anything to harm one of His own. *Would He?*

Didn't Jesus say, "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then . . . know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven?" (Luke 11:11–13)?

So I was asking Him for a fish. I was asking Him for an egg. I was begging Him for something good. Wouldn't leaving me in paralysis for the rest of my life be like handing me a loathsome, lethal snake or scorpion? Would a loving Father treat His daughter like that? Of course not! He had to want me healed and whole again.

After a couple of years, I remember thinking to myself, Maybe I've learned the lessons God wanted to teach me. I'm doing okay in this wheelchair. The suicidal thoughts are gone. Depression comes less frequently. My whole family is a lot closer to the Lord. I'm a bit more patient, and hey, I think I'm doing pretty well without the use of my hands. And didn't the Lord say, "Ask and it will be given to you?" (Matthew 7:7)?

But how should I ask for healing? I thought of my horse when I was a young girl, of how I had to learn to catch her to put the halter on. No horse wants to be caught. If they see you coming, they gallop away. So when I got within a few yards, I turned and sat with my back to her. Sure enough, within minutes I felt her muzzle on my back. I slowly turned, stroked her forehead, and gently slipped the halter over her head.

Maybe God is that way—maybe He's waiting for me to turn my back on my wish for a healthy body. Or to turn my back on wanting to catch Him. I began to wonder if I should just release my angst, just let it go. Maybe that way, He would come up behind me and give me my wish.

My sister Jay and I heard that Kathryn Kuhlman, a famous faith healer, was coming to the Washington, D.C., Hilton ballroom. Stories had reached us about cancer-ridden people who'd been cured in Philadelphia at one of her crusades. I wondered if I should go to the healing service in Washington, D.C.

One morning, when Jay was putting my legs through my range-of-motion exercises, Ernest Angley came on television. He was an odd sort of man who wore a bad toupee and ill-fitting suits, and Jay and I enjoyed his antics. My sister and I stopped and watched as people dropped their crutches or got up out of their wheelchairs, many raising their hands and declaring they were free from pain.

“Do you think God could heal you?” Jay asked, staring at the screen.

“Maybe it is time,” I replied. And so, wondering if this might be an answer to the prayers of many, we found our way to Washington Hilton and the packed-out healing service.

I remember the night so well. Miss Kuhlman breezed onto the stage in her white gown, and my heart raced as I prayed, “Lord, the Bible says You heal all our diseases. I’m ready for You to get me out of this wheelchair. Please, would You?”

God answered. And again, His answer was no.

Wheeling away from the crusade that night, I was number fifteen in a line of thirty wheelchair-users waiting to exit at the stadium elevator, all of us trying to make a fast escape ahead of the people on crutches. I remember glancing around at all the disappointed and confused people and thinking, *Something’s wrong with this picture. Is this the only way to deal with suffering? Trying desperately to remove it?*

When I looked in the mirror after I got home, I saw their sullen expression staring back. I was just as perplexed as the people near the elevator.

Okay, let me get this straight: God is good. God is love. He is all powerful. Plus, when He walked on earth, He bent over backward to relieve the sufferings of people, everyone from the hemorrhaging woman to the centurion’s servant. So why does my five-year-old niece, Kelly, have brain cancer? Why did my brother-in-law abandon my sister and their family? Why does Daddy’s arthritis not respond to medication?

There had to be something I wasn’t seeing.

There had to be other reasons—good reasons beyond my understanding—for God to allow such suffering.

Looking for Answers

I remember reading all the books on healing I could get my hands on. Gleaning counsel from friends and pastors and Christian leaders. Everyone agreed that God *could* heal any person any time, no matter how serious the problem.

But it was frustrating. No one could agree whether God *wills* to heal everybody who comes to Him in faith. Some said one thing, some said something else. And everyone seemed to back their positions with Scripture.

For me, it all seemed to boil down into two extreme positions—with a plethora of opinions and positions in between. On the one hand, you have people who say healing was for “back then,” that the age of miracles is past, and you shouldn’t even ask for or expect healing today. After all, they will say, the book of Acts is just history . . . Luke’s account is of a transitional era and not a guide for faith and practice today.

On the other side, you have people teaching that we can appropriate healing just like we do forgiveness of sins. They say that miracles ought to be part of the everyday life of the believer and that healing from disease is part of our heritage as sons and daughters of God.

They quote Isaiah 53:5, where it says that Messiah

*was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.*

Or they will go to the book of 1 Peter, where it says, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins

and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24).

And then, as I said, you encounter every combination of those teachings imaginable. You have this theory and that theory. This interpretation and that interpretation. This person’s experience and that person’s experience.

I had my doubts about both extremes, but right from the get-go, I just couldn’t go along with those who denied that God ever heals anyone miraculously today. In the first place, who is in a position to say this? Even if I didn’t know of anyone whom God had healed in a way that defied medical explanation, what would that prove? It’s a big wide world out there with people in every corner of it seeking the Lord with all their hearts.

In fact, I do know of such a person who was healed. A personal friend. A number of years ago, this mature Christian lady suffered from a severe bone-marrow disease. Every known medical procedure having failed, the doctors pronounced her “incurable” and advised her to get her affairs in order. There was no hope.

My friend, however, believes in the power of prayer. She and others simply took the matter before the Lord and placed it in His hands. When she returned to the doctor some time later for an examination, he dropped his jaw in amazement. This man was not a believer in Christ, but after taking repeated drug tests over a period of time, he told my friend. “There is no natural or medical explanation I can give. Your situation was beyond hope. All I can say is that this is a miracle.”

Fifteen years later, she was still healthy. I knew this woman well enough to feel confident she was not deceiving me into believing something that never really happened.

Having related this story, however (and you probably have stories of your own), I have to say here that I really agree with people who insist on judging experiences by the light of Scripture, and not the other way around. Contemporary Christians tend to put too much

weight on their experience anyway. Then they set up their conclusions as some kind of absolute truth by which everything else is to be interpreted, putting those experiences on an equal level with Scripture.

But this doesn't mean we should totally *ignore* our experiences. There are far too many all over the world who claim to have experienced or witnessed miraculous healing for us to write them off (which I would never do anyway). Many of these testimonies come from people who are soundly grounded in the Scriptures and mature in the faith—and many more are from the field of medicine. All of this should flash a yellow caution light in our minds if we're among those who feel the Bible totally rules out miracles for our day.

God deals with His children as He wills.

It should make us go back and be sure we have understood God's Word correctly.

Here is a ruby, hard-won. God deals with His children as He wills. To one He gives a life of relative ease and comfort; to another He gives the privilege of suffering for Him in a concentration camp. For some, He rewards their faith in this life; for others, He waits until they step across the line into eternity. I can't take my own experience from the hand of God and set it up as the absolute norm for His dealing with others.

No, experiences aren't everything.

But they aren't nothing either.

So I had to rule out that pole of the spectrum that says God never heals miraculously today. In my opinion, the Bible doesn't teach it and experience doesn't support it.

All of this makes a lively debate in a Starbuck's over a cup of Caffé Verona. But it isn't theory when you have a teenager stricken with leukemia or a little one burning with fever or a spouse going blind. When you find yourself in the talons of fear over a loved one's medical report or submerged in an ocean of pain that won't recede and no medicine can touch, you probably won't be checking

out an exhaustive theology book out of the library. You probably won't be dusting off your Bible school notes on dispensations and predestinations.

You'll probably be on your face before a living, loving God, crying out for His mercy. Suffering shrugs off academic arguments and sterile theological sub-points.

Suffering humbles us under the mighty hand of God.

So many of God's purposes remain shrouded in mystery to me . . . and so they will until I begin a joyous "graduate study" in heaven. But I have learned some things . . . rubies of wisdom I wish I could share with my younger self. Maybe the conversation would go like this:

I Wish I Were Healed

I know.

We wish for a lot of things. What's the old rhyme? If wishes were horses then beggars would ride. If wishes were reality, then the accident would have never happened, or if it had, I could get up out of my wheelchair and walk away from it forever. I could dance with my husband . . . run into the California surf . . . paint with my hands instead of my mouth . . . walk down an autumn lane with wind in my hair and leaves crunching under my feet . . . feel the strong body of a galloping horse beneath me . . . cradle a newborn baby in my arms.

I recently became aware of a website where people from all over the world—including many who only have a working familiarity with English—post their wishes. Many of the wishes are light-weight, silly, or seem totally random. Like the one that said:

My wish is to collect \$2,250 by 11/7/07.

Isn't that interesting? The wisher doesn't want \$10,000, or even \$2,249.99. The desired amount isn't a penny less or a penny more

than \$2,250. But as long as you're wishing, why not wish for a million?

Then there's the wisher who posted this modest desire:

I wish I become the most successful person in the world.

I've got to admire that one. He or she decided to push it to the max, to go for the biggest prize. But how will they know if their wish is ever granted? What is the criterion for worldly success? Money? Fame? Power? And would they really be happy if they "had it all"? Another anonymous wisher also longed for success—but with a touch more realism.

I wish to succeed in everything in my life, unfortunately I'm unsuccessful in everything.

One nameless woman who (for the moment) felt like a winner in the lottery of life, still felt compelled to wish that the happiness would never go away.

Now that I've finally found my one, I wish we'll be together and love one another forever. I wish we'll tie the knot soon and take care of each other for the rest of our lives. We belong to each other forever and will never fall apart.

A few of the wishes betray deep longings or unimaginable distress. "Emmi" wrote (to no one in particular):

I wish I could have a baby. Ever since I was little I have always wanted to have a child, and it seems to be the hardest thing in the world for me to achieve . . .

Another woman sounded really desperate:

I wish I get well soon. I can't go for an another operation. God, please help me from my mother-in-law. I know, whatever dissatisfaction I have in my life, all for her ONLY!!! She brought me in this condition, where I find myself ill, not happy with

anything. Because of this illness I can't have kids too and I know that was and is her wish. God, please help me, help me help me!!!

Was it a wish with God's name attached or a prayer? God only knows. When I read these postings I thought to myself, How sad! People wish for things with no real belief that their wishing will make any difference at all. It's an obvious exercise in futility, and yet they do it anyway, because ... what are we to do with all those deep longings in our heart? A wish may be only a coin tossed in a fountain, a four-leaf clover, or a helium balloon released into the wind ... but people want so much to be happy and don't know what else to do or where else to turn.

I could wish for a lot of things. I have, I do, and I suppose I always will. But wishes are whipped cream, cotton candy, and a wisp of steam off your morning coffee. There's nothing to them except a pleasant daydream that can occupy the imagination for a moment before dumping you back into an unhappy real world with nothing accomplished and no dreams fulfilled.

Children of God are all about reality, and don't have to live on wishes.

Hope is better than a wish.

The apostle Paul writes:

Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. *And hope does not disappoint us*, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. (Romans 5:3–5, emphasis added)

Wishes tie us to fantasies with wispy, spiderweb filaments. Hope ties us to the reality of the living God and the changeless truth of His Word with tugboat cable as thick as an old growth cedar.

As I've mentioned, there was a period in my life when I couldn't face my true situation and wanted to stay in bed all day living in a

fantasy world, pretending my accident had never happened. That path, as Solomon tells us so vividly, would eventually lead to death, not life.

*There is a way that seems right to a man,
but in the end it leads to death.*

(Proverbs 14:12)

Life is short enough without investing it on flights-of-fancy and wishing-upon-a-star. When we come before our God, worn down by our sorrows and disabilities as we may be, we come before a real and all-powerful Lord who loves us.

The book of Hebrews, addressed to a discouraged company of believers enduring the fires of persecution, is full of words of strong encouragement. Speaking of the promises God has given us as His children, the author reminds us that

we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. (Hebrews 6:18–20)

The hope that God offers has nothing in common with “wishing upon a star.” The hope that ties us to Jesus and to heaven is the strongest hope in the universe. Biblical hope doesn’t say, “I wish,” it says, “*I know.*”

And even though our circumstances here on earth may be terribly difficult—or even overwhelming—God has given us something, Someone, to hang onto until He steps in to change our situation or take us home.

The bottom line? God wants us to live in reality, not fantasy-land. In the J. B. Phillips paraphrase, Paul says to the Romans: “As I think you have realized, the present time is of highest importance—it is time to wake up to reality. Every day brings God’s salvation

nearer. The night is nearly over, the day has almost dawned” (Romans 13:11–12).

But Why Wasn't I Healed?

Is it because God has changed?

A million times no.

Is God still the God of miracles and wonders in this present age?

A million times yes.

He operates in the natural and in the supernatural with equal ease. He is as powerful and as present and as attentive today as He has ever been.

*Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save,
nor his ear too dull to hear. . . .*

(Isaiah 59:1)

*The LORD your God is with you,
he is mighty to save.*

(Zephaniah 3:17)

Miracles of healing still happen. But they are not the everyday rule-of-thumb.

Many eyes will stay blind. Many babies will die at birth. Many cancers will not be eradicated until that ultimate healing of a new body and a new life in His presence. And many paraplegics and quadriplegics will never regain the use of unresponsive legs, arms, and hands.

As a ruby I would love to share with my younger self. I would gently say, “Joni, no matter how much we may wish it were otherwise, the Bible does not teach that He will always heal those who come to Him in faith. He sovereignly reserves the right to heal or not to heal as He sees fit. He sovereignly reserves the right to call His children home to heaven at the moment of His choosing.”

Even when the God-Man walked the earth only a small number of people—those who happened to be in His immediate vicinity—were healed. He fed five thousand and He fed four thousand but many in Israel were still hungry. He drove out demons wherever He went, but He never went very far, and many demons remained entrenched, most likely to this very day in that tortured, blood-soaked land. He raised several from the dead, but only a few, who would live a few more years to die yet again.

Look at the first chapter of Mark's gospel. After word spread throughout Capernaum about Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law, the whole town brought their sick and lame and gathered outside Simon's home. Long after sunset, Jesus was still healing people with infirmities and illnesses. The next day, very early in the morning, the people returned, bringing more friends and relatives who needed healing.

But Jesus was nowhere around.

Simon and his companions went to look for Him, and when they found Him off in a solitary place praying, they exclaimed, "Everyone is looking for you!"

You would think Jesus would jump to His feet, gather up His robe and go running down the hill. Not so. Reading Mark 1:38, you can almost picture Him rising slowly to His feet, dusting off His robe, then replying after a moment's thought, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."

It's not that He stopped caring about the cancer-ridden and the blind and the lame; it's just that their illnesses weren't His primary focus. The Gospel was. His main message was, sins kill, hell is real, but God is merciful. His kingdom will change you, and I am your passport. Whenever people missed this—whenever they started coming to Him to have their pains and problems removed—Jesus backed away.

No matter how great our faith or fervent our prayers, there will

be times—perhaps many times—when our plea for health and healing will be answered with no.

But not everyone agrees with that.

A couple of years ago I agreed to a guest appearance with a well-known Christian television icon. After a number of minutes of carefully sharing my views on healing and God's will, the host turned to the camera and said, "Brothers and sisters, we shouldn't allow ourselves to be duped by Satan in these matters. Healing is promised in God's Word, and it really all boils down to a matter of your faith."

By implication, he was telling a national television audience that the reason I sat there beside him in a wheelchair was because I didn't have faith. Or at least not *enough*. Had he never read all the times God specifically tells His followers—even followers with great faith—to expect hardship? Second Corinthians 1:5 says, "The sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives," and Acts 14:22 warns us we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. And that's just scratching the surface!

Still, I was stung by those unexpected remarks, and I felt my face growing hot with hurt and indignation. It was all I could do to wait for a commercial break before tears flowed from my eyes.

The man may have a huge ministry and millions of viewers, but He is wrong. God is God, and it is He and He alone who decides who will be healed and who will not. Yes, faith is vital to everything, and "without faith it is impossible to please Him." But faith's focus must always be Jesus Christ—and nobody draws close to Christ who doesn't first share in Christ's sufferings. Besides, at the end of the day, it is not who has the most faith, but what God in His wisdom, love, and sovereignty chooses to do.

Who Causes My Trials? God or Satan?

The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger."

Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.
(Job 1:12)

The words were scarcely out of God's mouth when Sabean massacre Job's servants, lightning kills sheep and shepherds, Chaldeans slaughter camels and herdsmen, and a desert wind collapses a house on Job's children.

How tragic!

Yet in a nutshell, Job's saga teaches us everything we need to know about God's sovereignty. (And maybe a nutshell is about all we could really handle anyway.)

What caused Job's trials? At the most basic level, *natural forces* did—natural low-pressure systems that could have been explained in scientific terms. At the same basic level, *evil people* caused Job's trials—those greedy raiding parties needed no prompting; they devised their own wicked schemes. At a deeper level, *Satan* did—the Devil turned around after leaving God's presence, and before we can blink, carnage is everywhere. Scripture leaves little doubt that Satan was behind instigating those roaming cutthroats and sponsoring those killer storms. (Although the storms were a natural phenomena and the pillagers acted in a way natural to violent men, the Bible says Satan engineered it all.)

So who or what caused Job's trials? At the deepest level, *the adversity in Job's life came about through God's rule and authority over everything*. Yes, Satan had asked permission to stir things up, but ultimately, it was God who signed the authorization papers.

Satan, in his hatred for God and humanity, acted freely according to his nature.

The bloodthirsty Sabean behaved like, well, bloodthirsty Sabean.

The Chaldeans fell into their normal pattern of wickedness.

And the freak storms behaved according to natural laws. If Job's kids would have had the Weather Channel in those days, they could have seen it coming on satellite images or Doppler radar.

God's overarching plan made room for Job's trials, but God didn't cause them. God exploited the deliberate evil of some bad characters and the impersonal evil of some bad storms without forcing anyone's hand.

We're faced with the same dilemma centuries later, when Moses stood in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. In the space of two chapters, the Bible tells us:

But this time also Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the people go. (Exodus 8:32)

And then we read . . .

But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let the Israelites go. (Exodus 10:20)

So which is it? Who did the hardening of Pharaoh's heart? As God's ambassador to the Egyptian king, Moses went before Pharaoh's royal throne more than once to say, "Let my people go!"

Yet Pharaoh was immovable; his heart had been hardened against the Israelites. But when it comes to Pharaoh's stony resolve and exactly *who* did the hardening, Scripture points to both Pharaoh and the Lord.

A collaboration leading to evil?

No, that cannot be. We know from James 1:13 that God does not inject the idea of evil into anyone's heart. So how is it that "the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart"?

Through the common work of grace in our world, God is constantly staving off evil and restraining the fury of Satan so that harm and calamity do not overwhelm us. In the final analysis, the devil can only do what God allows. Every once in awhile, however—as in the case of Pharaoh—God lifts His hand of restraining grace to allow evil men to carry out their wicked plans, *only* as it serves God's higher purposes.

God was as much as saying to Pharaoh, "So you want to sin?"

You're determined to defy Me and close your mind and heart to My voice and to the miraculous evidence before your very eyes? Very well, then. You've chosen your course. You've made your bed, and now you will sleep in it. But I will make sure that when you do, your evil intentions suit My higher purposes and plan. You will defy Me for now, but soon—and too late—you will see My glory."

I'm reminded of the much-quoted statement of C. S. Lewis: "There are two kinds of people: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, 'All right, then, have it your way.'"

Solomon tells us:

*A man who remains stiff-necked
after many rebukes
will suddenly be destroyed
—without remedy.*

(Proverbs 29:1)

And that certainly was the case with Pharaoh. He was allowed to go his evil, reckless way—but even in his wickedness, God would turn the evil the king intended into salvation for His people.

Even though humans have an intellect and a will of their own, God ultimately governs all they do—including evil intentions. And He does it *all* without impugning His righteous and holy character.

In other words, God doesn't say, "Into each life a little rain must fall" and then aim a hose in earth's general direction to see who gets the wettest. Rather He screens the trials that come to each of us, allowing only those that accomplish His good plans. He takes no joy in human agony. Nothing happens by accident, not even tragedy, not even sins committed against us. God is in control, and that's what I love about Him.

True, God's decrees allow suffering, but He doesn't "do" the suffering. He's not the one wielding the club.

These are deep waters, my friend.

Welcome to the world of finite humans trying to comprehend an infinite God. As we've said, God permits all sorts of things He doesn't approve of. He allows others to do what He would never do.

He didn't steal Job's camels.

He didn't entice the blood-thirsty Sabians to wreak havoc.

He didn't push the four pillars of the house down on a joyous family dining together.

And yet ... He didn't take His hand off the wheel for thirty seconds, either.

This idea doesn't sit well with many people. But think of the alternative. What if God insisted on a hands-off policy toward the tragedies swimming your way? What if He removed all of the restraints from Satan? Left to his own, the Devil would make Jobs out of all of us.

But God curbs evil. Evil can only raise its head where God deliberately backs away—always for reasons that are specific, wise, and good—but often hidden during this present life.¹⁰

So (and here's the big question): *Who caused my diving accident?*

I could ask, "Was it God's fault?" and be assured that although He is sovereign, no it was not His fault.

I might wonder ... *Was my accident a direct attack from the devil?*

Well, yes, maybe it was. But I could press that still further and say that it was neither a direct assault from God or the devil, but simply the consequence of living in a fallen world fraught with dangers (like a shifting sandbar in the shallow water of Chesapeake Bay).

The point is, I never did rise up out of my wheelchair after the little prayer meeting in that country church. But God was there. He was listening with tender compassion. He was lovingly holding the entire moment in His powerful and sovereign hands.

Do your circumstances seem to be careening out of control? Remember that God is with you through it, loving you and caring

... and allowing the details to play out exactly in accordance with His plan.

When life seems wild, crazy, and utterly out of control, it is not.

When it seems as though God has forgotten you or turned His back on you to tinker with some other universe, He has not.

When it seems like you have somehow fallen out of His favor, been edged outside the circle of His protection, or missed the bus on His love, you have not.

And that's what it means to walk by faith.

How Did Suffering Come into Our World?

In the beginning, God created the universe and gave the earth to man, appointing him as “assistant ruler” over the earth (Genesis 1:26). Adam and Eve ruled the earth under God’s authority. There was no sin and, therefore, none of sin’s awful results. Pollution was nonexistent. Nature was helpful, not hostile to man. No hurricanes, floods, tsunamis, tidal waves, or volcanic eruptions threatened man’s survival. Death and disease were unknown. There was no fear that one of Eden’s luscious-looking fruits might secretly contain some fatal poison. For both humans and the world of nature, it was truly paradise.

But at some point in this idyllic life on a perfect world, the evil one entered the scene. Satan, who had rebelled against God in a prideful struggle, followed by his army of demons, had set up a rival kingdom against God.

And planet earth became his headquarters. As C. S. Lewis imagined it, earth became “the silent planet,” isolated and alone in the universe.

Mankind was enticed to sin, to eat the forbidden fruit, and as a result a curse fell upon man—and all of creation. (See Romans 8:20–23.) The whole realm of nature became subject to futility and frustration, to the endless cycle of change and decay. It seems quite possible that before this time, all animals may have been vegetarians. Now they fed upon one another, and violence brought about the law of the jungle.

Just as thorns and thistles attacked the earth, sickness and weakness attacked man's body. As we read through the book of Genesis, the human lifespan (once immortal) became shorter and shorter. No longer did people live hundreds of years as the early generations did. Illness and disease infested the world. Deformed babies and mentally-handicapped children became a fact of life.

And worst of all—the whole process ended in death.

Plants died.

Animals died.

People died.

Yes, sin brought its own special consequences and results. Satan became the king of planet earth, the “god of this age,” the “ruler of the kingdom of the air,” and the “prince of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 2:2; John 12:31).

Where then does disease come from?

Disease is just one of the many results of man's sin, along with death, sorrow, guilt, and disasters of nature.

Scripture on God's Control over Human Suffering¹²

All Christians acknowledge that God holds ultimate power in the universe. But does He always *exercise* it, especially when humans suffer? The causes behind human suffering are listed as major categories below. Under each are Scriptures asserting God's *active* (not merely reactive) control.

I. God exercises control over the inanimate forces of nature

- A. Genesis 1:3: *And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.*
- B. Genesis 1:9: *And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so.*
- C. Genesis 1:11: *Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so.*
- D. Genesis 6:17: *"I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish."*
- E. Genesis 19:24–25: *Then the LORD rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the LORD out of the heavens. Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, including all those living in the cities—and also the vegetation in the land.*
- F. Exodus 3:2: *There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.*

- G. Exodus 9:23, 26: *When Moses stretched out his staff toward the sky, the LORD sent thunder and hail, and lightning flashed down to the ground. So the LORD rained hail on the land of Egypt. . . . The only place it did not hail was the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were.*
- H. Exodus 10:21–23: *Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand toward the sky so that darkness will spread over Egypt—darkness that can be felt.” So Moses stretched out his hand toward the sky, and total darkness covered all Egypt for three days. . . . Yet all the Israelites had light in the places where they lived.*
- I. Exodus 14:21, 26–27: *Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided. . . . Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen.” Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the LORD swept them into the sea.*
- J. Numbers 16:28–33: *Then Moses said, “This is how you will know that the LORD has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea: If these men die a natural death and experience only what usually happens to men, then the LORD has not sent me. But if the LORD brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the LORD with contempt.” As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, with their households and all Korah’s men and all their possessions. They went down alive into the grave, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community.*
- K. Psalms 147:12, 15–18: *Extol the LORD, O Jerusalem; praise your God, O Zion. . . . He sends his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly. He spreads the snow like wool and scatters the frost like ashes. He hurls down his hail like pebbles. Who can withstand his icy blast?*

He sends his word and melts them; he stirs up his breezes, and the waters flow.

- L. Amos 4:7–10: *“I also withheld rain from you when the harvest was still three months away. I sent rain on one town, but withheld it from another. One field had rain; another had none and dried up. People staggered from town to town for water but did not get enough to drink, yet you have not returned to me,” declares the LORD. “Many times I struck your gardens and vineyards, I struck them with blight and mildew . . . yet you have not returned to me,” declares the LORD.*
- M. Jonah 1:4: *Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.*
- N. Mark 4:36–41: *Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. . . . He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” They were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”*

II. God exercises control over the animal world (includes disease-causing micro-organisms)

- A. Genesis 2:19: *Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them. . . .*
- B. Genesis 6:20: *Two of every kind of bird, of every kind of animal and of every kind of creature that moves along the ground will come to you to be kept alive.*
- C. Exodus 8:1–2, 6: *Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘This is what the LORD says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. If you refuse to let them go, I will plague your whole country with frogs.’” . . . So Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land.*

- D. Exodus 8:20–21, 24, 30–31: *Then the LORD said to Moses, “Get up early in the morning and confront Pharaoh as he goes to the water and say to him, ‘This is what the LORD says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. If you do not let my people go, I will send swarms of flies on you. . . .’” And the LORD did this. Dense swarms of flies poured into Pharaoh’s palace and into the houses of his officials, and throughout Egypt the land was ruined by the flies. . . . Then Moses left Pharaoh and prayed to the LORD, and the LORD did what Moses asked: The flies left Pharaoh and his officials and his people; not a fly remained.*
- E. Exodus 10:13: *So Moses stretched out his staff over Egypt, and the LORD made an east wind blow across the land all that day and all that night. By morning the wind had brought the locusts.*
- F. Numbers 22:28: *Then the LORD opened the donkey’s mouth, and she said to Balaam, “What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?”*
- G. 1 Kings 17:2–4: *Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah: “Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there.”*
- H. 2 Kings 17:25: *When they first lived there, they did not worship the LORD; so he sent lions among them and they killed some of the people.*
- I. Jonah 1:17 cf. 2:10: *But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah. . . . And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.*
- J. Jonah 4:6–7: *Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head. . . . But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered.*
- K. Matthew 17:27: *[Jesus speaking to Peter] “But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours.”*

III. God exercises control over human tools and technology

- A. Exodus 14:24–25: *During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. He made the wheels of their chariots come off so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."*
- B. 2 Kings 6:5–6: *As one of them was cutting down a tree, the iron ax head fell into the water. "Oh, my lord," he cried out, "it was borrowed!" The man of God asked, "Where did it fall?" When he showed him the place, Elisha cut a stick and threw it there, and made the iron float.*
- C. 2 Chronicles 18:33–34: *[Setting: God has decreed that wicked King Ahab of Israel must die in battle. The prophet Micaiah delivers this message to Ahab, who ignores the prophet and goes to war anyway. The battle is described.] But someone drew his bow at random and hit the king of Israel between the sections of his armor. . . . All day long the battle raged, and the king of Israel propped himself up in his chariot facing the Arameans until evening. Then at sunset he died. [The point: God fulfilled his purpose to have Ahab killed in war by overseeing the path of an arrow shot "at random."]*
- D. Proverbs 16:33: *The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.*
- E. Daniel 3:27–28: *[Setting: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are thrown into a blazing furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar for refusing to bow down to a golden image. The soldiers who throw them in are burned, but the three are unharmed. Amazed, the king calls for them to come out.] . . . The satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them. Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants!"*

IV. God exercises control over the thoughts and actions of humans

- A. The Bible clearly teaches that God governs even human beings, who have intelligence and a will of their own.
1. Proverbs 16:9: *In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.*
 2. Proverbs 19:21: *Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD'S purpose that prevails.*
 3. Proverbs 20:24: *A man's steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand his own way?*
 4. Proverbs 21:1: *The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.*
 5. Daniel 5:23: *[Daniel speaking to the pagan king Belshazzar]*
" . . . But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways."
- B. Most Christians willingly acknowledge God as the ultimate source of all people's good deeds.
1. Genesis 20:3–6: *[Abimelech, pagan king of Gerar, has taken Sarah, wife of Abraham, into his harem.] But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, "You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman." Now Abimelech had not gone near her, so he said, "Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation? Did [her husband Abraham] not say to me, 'She is my sister,' and didn't she also say, 'He is my brother'? I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands." Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her."*
 2. 1 Samuel 25:32–33: *David said to Abigail, "Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands."*
 3. Ezra 1:1: *In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the*

heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing. [The Jewish exiles may return to Israel.]

4. Acts 16:14: *One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.*
5. Romans 7:18: *I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. [The point: Human nature, left to itself, never chooses the truly good; it chooses good only when aided by God.]*
6. Philippians 2:13: *For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*
7. 2 Corinthians 8:16: *I thank God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you.*

C. But the Bible is equally clear that God controls even people's wicked, deluded actions. He is not the source of their wicked deeds, for James 1:13 says that God tempts no one. Rather, He sees to it that people give expression to their own sinful desires in such a way as to fulfill His plans unwittingly, not their own. He accomplishes this by infinite wisdom beyond our grasp.

1. Genesis 45:7–8: [Joseph, to his brothers who sold him into slavery.] *"But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt."*
2. Exodus 4:21: *The LORD said to Moses, "When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go." Cf. Romans 9:17: For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."*

3. Exodus 14:17: *“I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after [the Israelites]. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen.”*
4. Deuteronomy 2:30: *“But Sihon king of Heshbon refused to let us pass through. For the LORD your God had made his spirit stubborn and his heart obstinate in order to give him into your hands . . .”*
5. Joshua 11:19–20: *Except for the Hivites living in Gibeon, not one city made a treaty of peace with the Israelites, who took them all in battle. For it was the LORD himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the LORD had commanded Moses.*
6. 2 Samuel 17:14: *Absalom and all the men of Israel said, “The advice of Hushai the Arkite is better than that of Ahithophel.” For the LORD had determined to frustrate the good advice of Ahithophel in order to bring disaster on Absalom.*
7. 2 Kings 24:2–3: *The LORD sent Babylonian, Aramean, Moabite and Ammonite raiders against [King Jehoiakim]. He sent them to destroy Judah, in accordance with the word of the LORD proclaimed by his servants the prophets. Surely these things happened to Judah according to the Lord’s command, in order to remove them from his presence because of the sins of Manasseh and all he had done.*
8. Psalm 105:25 NASB: *He turned [the Egyptians’] heart to hate His people. . . .*
9. Proverbs 16:4: *The LORD works out everything for his own ends—even the wicked for a day of disaster.*
10. Isaiah 10:5–7, 15: *[Setting: God is sending the wicked Assyrian armies to punish his people Israel, who have sinned so badly they are called “a godless nation.”]*

Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger,
 in whose hand is the club of my wrath!
 I send him against a godless nation,
 I dispatch him against a people who anger me,
 to seize loot and snatch plunder,
 and to trample them down like mud in the streets.

But this is not what he [the Assyrian king] intends,
this is not what he has in mind;
his purpose is to destroy,
to put an end to many nations. . . .
Does the ax raise itself above him who swings it,
or the saw boast against him who uses it?
As if a rod were to wield him who lifts it up,
or a club brandish him who is not wood!

11. Acts 4:27–28: [The early Christians are addressing God.] “Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.”
12. 2 Thessalonians 2:11–12: For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.

V. God exercises control even over Satan and demons

- A. Judges 9:23: God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem, who acted treacherously against Abimelech.
- B. 1 Samuel 16:14: Now the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him.
- C. 1 Kings 22:23: So now the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouths of all these prophets of yours. The LORD has decreed disaster for you.
- D. 1 Chronicles 21:1: Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel. Cf. 2 Samuel 24:1: Again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, “Go and take a census of Israel and Judah.”
- E. Job 2:4–6 NASB: Satan answered the LORD and said, “. . . Put forth Your hand now, and touch [Job’s] bone and his flesh; he will curse You to Your face.” So the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, he is in your power, only spare his life.” [The point: Satan knew he could not touch

Job without God decreeing it: “Put forth Thy hand.” God assigns the harassing of Job to Satan, yet clearly defines the limits beyond which he cannot operate: “Behold, he is in your power, only spare his life.”]

- F. Matthew 4:10–11: *Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! . . .” Then the devil left him. . . .*
- G. Mark 1:23–27: *Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.”*
- H. Luke 22:31: *“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat . . .” [The point: Satan would not ask for permission if the power was already his, for it is not his nature to limit his actions simply to avoid displeasing God.]*
- I. John 12:37–40: *Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: “Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: “He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them.” Cf. 2 Corinthians 4:4: The god of this age [i.e., Satan] has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. . . .*

VI. In summary, God exercises control over all beings, things, and actions

- A. Exodus 4:11: *The LORD said to him, “Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD?”*

- B. Job 42:2: *"I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted."*
- C. Psalms 33:10–11: *The LORD foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.*
- D. Psalms 115:3: *Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.*
- E. Lamentations 3:38: *Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?*
- F. Isaiah 14:27: *For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?*
- G. Isaiah 45:7: *"I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things."*
- H. Daniel 4:35: *He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"*
- I. Amos 3:6: *When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?*
- J. Ephesians 1:11: *In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.*
- K. 1 Thessalonians 3:3: *You know quite well that we were destined for [trials].*

In conclusion, God decrees all things, even human suffering, but Satan often is the messenger of those decrees even as he fights against the God who issued them. When Satan, evil people, or "accidents" of any kind bring trials upon us, we can answer with Joseph to his brothers who sold him into slavery, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20 NASB).

Scripture on God's Purpose in Our Sufferings

Discovering God's hand in hardship is really a discovery of God's Word. The following verses underscore a few of the benefits derived from our pain and problems. These power-packed passages serve as a lens through which we may gain a clearer perspective on our afflictions.

Suffering is used to increase our awareness of the sustaining power of God to whom we owe our sustenance.

Psalm 68:19: Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens.

God uses suffering to refine, perfect, strengthen, and keep us from falling.

Psalm 66:8–9: Praise our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard; he has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping.

Hebrews 2:10: In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.

Suffering allows the life of Christ to be manifested in our mortal flesh.

2 Corinthians 4:7–11: But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.

Suffering bankrupts us, making us dependent on God.

2 Corinthians 12:9: *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.*

Suffering teaches us humility.

2 Corinthians 12:7: *To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.*

Suffering imparts the mind of Christ.

Philippians 2:1–11: *If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Suffering teaches us that God is more concerned with character than comfort.

Romans 5:3–4: *Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.*

Hebrews 12:10–11: *Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.*

Suffering teaches us that the greatest good of the Christian life is not absence of pain but Christ-likeness.

2 Corinthians 4:8–10: *We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.*

Romans 8:28–29: *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

Suffering can be a chastisement from God for sin and rebellion.

Psalms 107:17: *Some became fools through their rebellious ways and suffered affliction because of their iniquities.*

Obedience and self-control is learned from suffering.

Hebrews 5:8: *Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.*

Psalms 119:67: *Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.*

Romans 5:1–5: *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.*

James 1:2–8: *Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.*

Philippians 3:10: *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.*

Voluntary suffering is one way to demonstrate the love of God.

2 Corinthians 8:1–2, 9: *And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity . . . For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*

Suffering is part of the struggle against sin.

Hebrews 12:4–13: *In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: “My son, do not*

make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

Suffering is part of the struggle against evil men.

Psalm 27:12: *Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes, for false witnesses rise up against me, breathing out violence.*

Psalm 37:14–15: *The wicked draw the sword and bend the bow to bring down the poor and needy, to slay those whose ways are upright. But their swords will pierce their own hearts, and their bows will be broken.*

Suffering is part of the struggle for the kingdom of God.

2 Thessalonians 1:5: *All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering.*

Suffering is part of the struggle for the Gospel.

2 Timothy 2:8–9: *This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained.*

Suffering is part of the struggle against injustice.

1 Peter 2:19: *For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.*

Suffering is part of the struggle for the name of Christ.

Acts 5:41: *The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.*

1 Peter 4:14: *If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.*

Suffering indicates how the righteous become sharers in Christ's suffering.

2 Corinthians 1:5: *For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.*

1 Peter 4:12–13: *Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*

Endurance of suffering is given as a cause for reward.

2 Corinthians 4:17: *For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.*

2 Timothy 2:12: *If we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us.*

Suffering forces community and the administration of our gifts for the common good.

Philippians 4:12–15: *I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only.*

Suffering binds Christians together into a common or joint purpose.

Revelation 1:9: *I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.*

Suffering produces discernment, knowledge, and teaches us God's statutes.

Psalm 119:66–67, 71: *Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I believe in your commands. Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word . . . It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.*

Through suffering, God is able to obtain our broken and contrite spirit, which he desires.

Psalm 51:16–17: *You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

Suffering causes us to discipline our minds by making us focus our hope on the grace to be revealed at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 1:6, 13: *In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials . . . Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.*

God uses suffering to humble us so he can exalt us at the proper time.

1 Peter 5:6–7: *Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*

Suffering teaches us to number our days so we can present to God a heart of wisdom.

Psalm 90:7–12: *We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan. The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away. Who knows the power of your anger? For your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you. Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.*

Suffering is sometimes necessary to win the lost.

2 Timothy 2:8–10: *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.*

2 Timothy 4:5–6: *But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure.*

Suffering strengthens and allows us to comfort others who are weak.

2 Corinthians 1:3–11: *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which*

produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

Suffering is small compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ.

Philippians 3:8: What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.

God desires truth in our innermost being, and one way he does it is through suffering.

Psalms 51:6: Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.

Psalms 119:17: Do good to your servant, and I will live; I will obey your word.

The equity for suffering will be found in the next life.

Psalms 58:10–11: The righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked. Then men will say, "Surely the righteous still are rewarded; surely there is a God who judges the earth."

Suffering is always coupled with a greater source of grace.

- 2 Timothy 1:7–8: *For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God.*
- 2 Timothy 4:16–18: *At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

Suffering teaches us to give thanks in times of sorrow.

- 1 Thessalonians 5:18: *Give thanks in all circumstances.*
- 2 Corinthians 1:11: *Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.*

Suffering increases faith.

Jeremiah 29:11: *“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”*

Suffering allows God to manifest his care.

Psalms 56:8: *Record my lament; list my tears on your scroll—are they not in your record?*

Suffering stretches our hope.

Job 13:14–15: *Why do I put myself in jeopardy and take my life in my hands? Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face.*