

DON'T WASTE YOUR SUFFERING

“IF YOU LIVE long enough you will suffer. The only alternative to not suffering is not living long enough” - with those cheering words Don Carson starts an address on suffering. He’s right; suffering is an inevitable part of life, and yet we can be taken aback when it happens, ambushed and left reeling almost as much by the surprise as by the pain.

In this series of articles I don’t intend to deal with the questions of why suffering exists and how could God allow it. Suffering does exist, God does allow it, and we have to face it. The real question is “Will it destroy, damage or deepen our faith?” Over the next number of articles I want to look at how we could inadvertently exacerbate our suffering, how we can be prepared for it, how we can cope better with it and even grow, as God intends, in it. Some of what I’ve written are the lessons I’ve had to put into practice over the last year or so, but I’m well aware that what I went through doesn’t compare to what many of you have faced, either in severity, or in duration—yet the same principles apply.

In some ways these articles are addressed to people who aren’t suffering yet in order to prepare you to suffer. You need to lay the foundations now for when suffering arrives. You need to take truths and ingrain them into your personality, nail them into your thinking, so that

when suffering comes you don’t have massive adjustments to make. Harmful attitudes and habits of thought that seem of little significance now need to be rooted out or they will pour vinegar on the wounds of suffering. Otherwise we will waste our suffering. Suffering is bad enough, but the realisation that we have wasted it is far worse.

These articles are also for those who are in the thick of it, gritting their teeth and holding on. It’s so easy to exacerbate our suffering, to be transformed in the wrong direction, to be crushed rather than built by it, or just to be plain exhausted by one thing after another. Thankfully it is possible to pour the concrete of solid foundations even while the storm is raging, and to bolster foundations as the wind blows. I trust you will find



Widespread suffering makes international headlines but do we respond biblically to the tsunamis in our own lives?

help here too.

We will look at three things that waste our suffering, or conversely, three things which, if we get them in place now, will allow us to do more than hang on in there. They will allow us to grow amidst the suffering, and bring glory to our Saviour. All of them, somewhat ironically for someone who has eyesight difficulties, are to do with seeing, or the direction in which we look.

Suffering Waster 1: Deficient Trust – Not looking enough to God

Suffering exposes the nature and quality of our trust, like a stress test revealing the brittle points in a piece of material.

There are at least three deficiencies it can reveal:

No trust - If you are not a Christian, a lack of faith in God is going to cause your suffering to be more intense. One of the purposes of suffering in your life is to get your attention, to turn it away from everyday life to God. That may sound harsh, but suffering is usually the last in a variety of ways God has attempted to get your attention. To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, God has whispered to you in your pleasures and you have ignored him, spoken to you through your conscience and you have kept on ignoring, and now he has had to turn the volume up to get

your attention. I would urge you to give him your full attention, because continuing to not trust in him will only intensify the suffering.

Compartmentalised trust – The Christian can have a deficient trust too. It is all too easy to compartmentalise our faith. We can have 100% trust in Jesus for salvation, with a rock solid sense of assurance - that compartment is full of trust. But when it comes to the other compartments of life - the everyday matters of exam results, university/college places, work, providing for our family, injury, ambitions etc. - we are more in the habit of relying on our own abilities and plans. We trust Jesus to get us to Heaven, but we mostly look after ourselves here on earth. Suffering will expose the emptiness of the other compartments and we will feel the loss, sometimes even betrayal.

Contaminated trust – Our trust can be flawed with a variety of impurities. We can have a faulty view of God, seeing him as there with a big stick to batter us when we put a foot wrong, or as a distant aloof father whose delight has to be won, or, though we wouldn't say it out loud, we fear that in his pursuit of his own glory he will callously trample over us -we can fear God in all the wrong ways. Or we may believe that God will only shower us with blessings, that suffering isn't a part of the Christian's life - again our contaminated view will breed only disappointment.

Suffering reveals the nature of our trust, and it will be aggravated if our trust is deficient. Two common sources weaken our faith:

Looking too much at the problem (or at life)

If you are in the midst of suffering - where does your attention lie? Naturally it tends to drift and congregate around the problem. Our suffering can dominate our horizons, like a personalised thundercloud blotting out the sun.

If suffering hasn't hit yet - where does your attention lie? It's all too easy to let it focus too much on life, the everyday concerns of work, study, family, relationships, even of being a better Christian in the details of life.

Starting Your Preparation

Recommended reading on big picture living:

Don't Waste Your Life, John Piper

Recommended reading on suffering:

How Long, O Lord, Don Carson

Polishing God's Arrow, Jim Andrews



Recommended listening:

Don Carson – “A Pastoral Theology Of Suffering And Evil”

John Piper – 4 talks on “Treasuring Christ and the Call to Suffer”

(Google the titles, or go to the Messenger Facebook page for links)

That isn't going to prepare us to suffer well.

It is perfectly natural and understandable that our circumstances, especially suffering, should take our attention, but we are told to “take every thought captive” (2 Cor. 10:5). That's not passive imagery. It's forceful, decisive, deliberate. The imagery is of a mind that wants to drift to some place other than where it should be - it may be to somewhere sinful, or to suffering, or just to ordinary life. But we are to take our thoughts captive, focusing them on the greatness, the grandeur and the nature of our God so that our faith will be fed by fuel from Heaven, rather than clogged by the laundered diesel of our suffering or circumstances.

Here's a test - How do you read the Bible? A temptation for the practically minded, or for the keen young person is to tend to look for commands or instructions - What do you want me to do, Lord? That's great (and vital) for growing in the Christian life, but it can starve us of what we need for stability in the storms. We need also to read the Bible looking at God, gazing at God, grasping who he is and what he has done. While we are suffering, and before we suffer, we need to be filling our thoughts with the staggering immensity and delightful tenderness of our God.

More on this in the next issue when we look at specific ways to bolster our faith.

Listening too much to our emotions

We live in a feelings-driven world.

The prevailing culture in our world trains us to live by feelings - “I don't feel that I love him anymore.” Likewise, we can let suffering tell us “It doesn't seem as if God loves me anymore.” Feelings are a God-given gift, but like any gift Satan can take them and turn them into a weakness. Some of you will be more temperamentally inclined to listen to your feelings, others perhaps shaped too much by our culture. Whatever the case, we need to work hard at ruling our emotions rather than letting them rule us - so that our emotions are not fed by the problem, but fed by our understanding of who God is, and what he has already done.

This also applies before suffering hits. If we are in the habit of following our feelings and letting them determine our security in God, rather than nestling in the security of the Cross, we will struggle even more when suffering arrives and emotions go haywire. So work hard at challenging and feeding emotions with eternal truths, rather than following emotions fed by fluctuating circumstances.

We'll look at this in more detail next time, but let me say for now: Make it your aim to prepare yourself now, before suffering hits, for it will happen “if you live long enough” and open your Bible.



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