

SUFFERING

LOSING FOCUS

Mark Loughridge
highlights a third
suffering waster to avoid.

Suffering waster #3: Loss of Purpose— Not looking for anything

SO FAR WE have seen two things that will exacerbate our suffering. First of all, there is a deficient trust - when we are not looking enough at God. Second is a misplaced trust - when we are looking too much at other things; our plans matter more to us than God. Third is loss of purpose - when we aren't looking for anything at all.

Two 'Whys'

When we find ourselves in difficulty it is easy to ask, 'Why'- Why me? Why is this happening to me? What is God doing? What's the point of this?

Easy to ask, but much harder to answer, even harder when someone else is doing the asking. And from one angle we have to say that we don't know why.

There are two types of answers to 'why' questions. There is the fine-tuned answer which God alone knows. Sometimes we see little glimpses of what God is doing, occasionally in the midst, often later, when we see some of the purpose in our suffering. But what if we can't see anything like that?

There is another set of answers to the 'why' questions. They are the broad-brush answers.

These broad-brush answers give us a sense of purpose, something to be getting on with until God reveals

the fine-brush detail of the 'why?' Our task is to get on with the 'whys?' that we know the answers to, rather than agonising about the 'why?' which God has not yet revealed. We'll look at the broad-brush purposes in a moment, but first...

Two Dangers

Since God is both sovereign and loving, then he has brought suffering to you for your good. That means there is a purpose to it. We will not find good in suffering if we're not looking for it. And that's what we need to aim for.

But twin dangers fight against us seeing a sense of purpose in our suffering. There is the danger that we see suffering simply as something to be endured rather than profited from, where we grit our teeth and get on with it, missing the opportunity to grow.

Another danger is that we seek escape, either through sidestepping the issues (eg. resigning our job, ending a friendship) or through other forms of escapism (eg. alcohol, drugs, or an overdependence on medication). In the first instance we simply take the problem with us, and in the second we pretend it doesn't exist. In both cases we haven't actually learnt anything, and we miss out on God's purposes in our suffering.

Four Purposes

What purposes are there then in

suffering? There are at least four purposes that God has revealed:

1. Every moment of suffering is an opportunity to trust God more

All suffering is an opportunity to grow in our faith, in our relationship with God. Our trust may not be deficient, but like a muscle it can always grow stronger. So when we're struggling we need to say "Right, there's a purpose to this; at the very least this is to strengthen my faith, so I am going to hang in there and trust God. I am going to take God's promises - even just one and hang on to it for all I am worth." (More of this in the next article)

2. Every moment of suffering is an opportunity to grow in Christ-likeness

Not all suffering is because of particular sin. But suffering will highlight areas where we need to grow in Christ-likeness- the weeds that remain in our hearts. Sometimes we simply don't have the energy or emotional resources to mask our sin the way we normally do. We see more clearly areas where we aren't particularly Christ-like -increased irritability, short temper, self-centredness, self-pity. Suffering is an opportunity to work hard at one or two areas where we struggle under pressure.

Suffering is not an opportunity to hide behind the excuse of pain or hardship and become increasingly un-Christian-like.

It is also an opportunity to grow in the positive presence of godly traits - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control and many others. Suffering becomes the backdrop against which we determine to develop and display godly characteristics. Here then is a purpose to grasp - we are in the workshop of godliness.

3. Every moment of suffering is an opportunity to grow in the hope of Heaven

Suffering takes away from us some of the things of this world - people, health, dreams etc. Or it shows us how fragile and fleeting they are. In response we can either fix our gaze on the things that are going or fix our gaze on what is permanent.

It is not wrong to feel sadness over what is lost or failing - to grieve over a bereavement, a miscarriage or loss of sight. But if that's all we do, we're going to miss something. Is our sorrow tempered by our hope?

One of the things I struggled with before a couple of my eye operations was the prospect of not seeing my children again. Yet at the same time I was confident in God's goodness that, if I was going to lose my eyesight, then it would be for the best - and somehow I didn't want second best. Both sorrow and confidence can co-exist together. Our hope changes the flavour of our sadness. We look forward to a time when everything will be put right, so that even amidst sorrow we will not grieve as other men grieve who are without hope.

In Romans 5:3,4 Paul writes: "... but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."

Paul rejoices in suffering - not because he is a masochist who enjoys pain, nor because he is a stoic who coldly overlooks it, nor simply because Heaven is coming - but because in that moment suffering is allowing him to see something that he couldn't otherwise see: namely his hope.

My best effort at illustrating this is to ask you to imagine standing in a room with a glorious panoramic view.

That's the Hope of the Glory of God. Imagine that, fixed over the window you have a huge canvas, on which you are painting your life. There are the people, the hopes, the events, the successes, the places. As you go on, the painting gets richer and richer - it is life as you planned it. You stand back and say to yourself, "This is good. This is what I've wanted in life."

Then God comes along and pokes his finger through it. And you wonder, "What was that for; what was the point?" And then his hand appears carrying a knife, and it cuts someone out of your life, or a job or a hope. And a hole is left on the canvas. Then the canvas of life starts to age and crack and to peel away at the edges.

What's happening? What is God doing? He's helping you see something of the beautiful scenery that lies beyond, the Hope of the Glory of God. Sometimes the way he helps you to see it is by taking something out of your life, so that you can look through the hole and see him beyond it. Too often we are busy looking at the hole, at the

"Both sorrow and confidence can co-exist together"

damage, rather than through it. The picture is not the way we wanted it. But this is not an act of divine vandalism. As you step back and look at the picture the flood of light from the land beyond makes the broken picture even more glorious, even more beautiful. It is not a callous cutting away; it is the hand of a loving artist at work creating something more beautiful.

In the midst of the suffering we are enabled to see things that we could not otherwise see - facets of the hope of the glory of God - that are not going to disappoint us, in contrast to the things on the canvas which often will.

We need to train ourselves to look through the hole and not simply look at it, in order to see what God is showing us. And sometimes it matches almost identically the shape he has cut out. A relationship that we longed for is cut out, but through the hole we can see clearly the one who promises to love us for better, for

worse, in sickness and in health and never to leave us. Our eyesight is taken, but through that hole things can be seen that can't be seen with eyes.

Will we look at the hole or through it?

4. Every moment of suffering is an opportunity to display the glory of Christ over everything else

This is the one for the hammer on thumb moment - but it's true from the littlest thing right up to the biggest. We need to ask ourselves - Does the way we react look any different from people who don't know Jesus?

When people see how, amidst suffering, loss or hardship, we react with self-control, trust, godliness, and a forward-looking hope, they see that we have something they don't have. They see that Jesus means more to us than health, job, relationship or university place. Here is another purpose amidst trials - I am to display to my neighbours, family and friends the supreme worth of Jesus above everything else.

Finally...

All suffering has the same potential to destroy or weaken your faith, or to grow your faith and make Christ look good.

We need to invest our suffering - seeking to profit from it, not simply endure it.



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Clarification

An alert reader noticed that the closing paragraphs in the last article could give the impression that an irate Father had to be assuaged by a loving Son. The Father's love is certainly not in doubt. He sent his Son because he loved us. Rather, I was seeking to underline the benefits of the adoption secured by Christ, one of which is the Father's loving transformation of our hurt-filled past for our good.