Suffering and its Implications on Sanctification

Facts to keep in constant focus:
- Believers and unbelievers alike will suffer.
- We suffer because we live in a fallen world. Romans 8:20-22, creation was subjected to futility.
- We also suffer from our own rebellion (Rom 6:23).
- We suffer from what others do to us (Ps 56).

Benefits of suffering:
1. Matthew 19:24. Suffering exposes a need. We all have spiritual poverty. If there is no awareness of need, we do without.
2. Deuteronomy 8. Suffering exposes the heart. They experienced 40 years of suffering God humbled them.
3. 1 Peter 1:3-7. Progressive sanctification: already, not yet, past, present, future. “All kinds of trials” is purposely vague because each one of us is different. Malachi 3, the refiner’s purifying fire, is what Peter is talking about. Suffering brings difficulties into our lives that cause us to turn to God. Our only hope is the Lord, and suffering can teach us that.
4. Luke 12:22-34. Suffering reveals were our treasure is (12:34). Do we have misplaced dependency? If mankind was autonomous, we wouldn’t need help, we depend upon something. We live in anxiety because we have needs that we don’t look to the Lord for. Suffering exposes our codependency.
5. Luke 15:11-24. Suffering humbles us, causing us to come to ourselves. Jesus is the only character in the Bible to use parables. His heart was vertically aligned, sin against God and sin against others. Horizontal alleviation stops short of our vertical connection to God. “The bruising makes us set a high price on Christ. The gospel becomes the gospel indeed, then the fig leaves of morality will do us no good,” Richard Sibbes. Cultural morality won’t bring us to God.
6. 2 Cor 12:7-10. Thorn in the flesh. Whatever this was, Paul “implored (parakaleo παρακαλέω) the Lord three times that it would leave him. (2 Co 12:8). This verb means “to call out, plead, entreaty, beseech. But afterward, Paul had actually become “content with weakness, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties.” (2 Cor 12:10).
7. Press into Christ. Don’t miss the suffering which Christ endured on our behalf. Isaiah 53:5 points us toward Christ. Our story of pain becomes His story of redemption.
8. Job asked God questions. This was helpful to him.

Exhortations:
- Do not allow your afflictions to define you. Your afflictions are not who you are in Christ.
- Sit with people in their ashes. Call them to trust in God’s sovereignty.

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Patterns of Suffering

The Bible points to definite patterns of cause-effect in suffering. By studying these patterns you may find it easier to trust Him with suffering in your life. The patterns of suffering reveal enough design to point to the existence of an overall plan on His part. Unlike the dilemma of atheist Kaufmann who can only suggest a let's pretend-there's-meaning strategy, you have available in the Word of God assurance that every detail of your suffering has a purpose, whether God chooses to share it with you or not.

Remember all evil originated through creatures’ rebellious choices; evil wasn't there at creation. In both angelic and human spheres evil can be traced back to responsible post-creation choices that had suffering consequences. All suffering, therefore, has an aspect of directness for its origin. Yet not all suffering is due to the immediate choices of those afflicted. For example, what did an infant do to deserve to suffer and die in infancy, or what did we do as unbelievers to merit God's wake-up call to salvation? Jesus warned in John 9:3 against falsely concluding that suffering is always in a simple one-to-one relationship to the sufferer. There is an indirectness, too, in suffering whereby it is an interference into a person's life and is not directly asked for. The patterns of suffering, therefore, which follow are divided into direct and indirect categories. Some apply to all men; other apply to only unbelievers or believers.

DIRECT SUFFERING PATTERNS
(Clear consequences of creatures' choices)

1. General existence of sickness & death (physical and spiritual): law of Gen. 2:17 was disobeyed by Adam and Eve and consequences spread throughout world (Rom 5:12-14; 8:19-23); the Fall of Adam vindicates God's Word as reliable. Applies to all men.

2. General existence of self-induced misery (intensified physical, mental, and spiritual deterioration): law of Gal 6:7 works out through the first divine institution of responsible labor; continued rebellious living yields corrupt fruit of foolishness showing again that God's Word stands (Rom 1:24-32; Eph 4:17-19). Applies to all men.

3. General judgment pattern on nations and families: law of Gal. 6:7 works out through the divine institutions of the family and civil government; preserves opportunities for repentance among those inside nations and families (Exod 20:5-6; Num 14:18; Acts 17:26-27). Applies to all men.

4. Eternal existence of hell and the lake of fire: Justice of God originally directed against the fall of angels but which a man comes to share through Adam's fall, if he never responds to God's grace in this mortal life (Matt 25:41,46; Rev 20:10-15); provides for a permanent exclusion of evil from the new universe to come. Applies to unbelievers only.

5. Judgment in mortal life of believers: God the Father disciplines every believer as a spiritual parent when he rebels against His authority; warning to confess sin and be restored to fellowship (I Cor 11:29-31; Heb 12:5-13; Rev 3:19-20); can include physical death; can work simultaneously with authorized church discipline (Matt 18:17-18; I Cor 5:1-5). Applies to believers only.

6. Judgment after resurrection of believers and denial of rewards: Jesus Christ evaluates fruit of believers whether produced in obedience to His Spirit or produced in the energy of the flesh (1 Cor 3:10-15; 2 Cor 5:10-11; 2 Tim 2:11-13). Applies to believers only.

INDIRECT SUFFERING PATTERNS
(God personally intervenes but not as a direct consequence of some particular choice by the individual)

7. Evangelistic wake-up call: specially designed suffering can shock arrogant unbelieving self-confidence in pagan idolatries and self-righteousness (1 Sam 5; 1 Kings 18:21-40; Jonah 3; Acts 9:1-9); provides an extra opportunity for repentance unto salvation independent of choices of unbeliever. Applies to unbelievers only.

8. A nudge to spiritually advance: specially designed suffering to immunize against arrogant autonomy and protect a sense of dependency upon God's grace (Deut 8:2-6; Pss 119:71, 75; 2 Cor 12:1-10; 1 Pet 1:5-9; 5:5-10); provokes growth and preparation for coming service to others (2 Cor 1:4-7). Applies to believers only and to the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb 2:10; 5:8).


10. Evidence for edification of believers: specially designed suffering to convince other believers of the adequacy of the gospel (2 Cor 1:5-15; 4:7-18; Heb 12:1). Applies to believers only and to the Lord Jesus Christ (Phil 2:5-9; 1 Pet 2:21-23).

11. Evidence in the unseen angelic conflict: specially designed suffering that has unknown (to us) ramifications in the angelic conflict between God and Satan (Job 1-2; Luke 22:31-32; 1 Cor 6:2-3; 11:10; Eph 3:10). Applies to believers only and to the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt 4:1-11; 26:53-54).

Here, then, I have sketched eleven distinct patterns of suffering, each of which reveals that the limits of evil are very carefully controlled with a real purpose. Now, let's go to the last element in a biblical coping strategy.

A faithful worship and obedience. The goal of the biblical strategy toward evil is an inner peace that comes from looking at your Lord and knowing, really knowing, He has a perfect plan for you. But you can't get this quiet conviction that “all is well with my soul” by thinking and reacting with carnal mentality. As long as there lurks in your heart the notions that evil is a
never-ending mystery, you will always be tempted to think of yourself as an innocent victim. You will frantically search for an autonomous coping strategy based upon hopelessness, mostly likely some anesthetic to dull the soul’s pain.

The Word of God calls to us not to try to blank out the mind, not to go to sleep, and not to be drunk with wine. Our perfect role model, the Lord Jesus Christ, when faced with suffering always concentrated His mind away from all distractions. Until He settled the matter before His Father, He avoided normal daily food (Matt 4:2), sleep (Matt 26:40-41), and medicine (Matt 27:34). Once He could faithfully worship and obey, then He resumed as much normalcy as possible under the circumstances (Matt 4:11; 27:48).

We are spiritual creatures, and we must resolve issues with God to restore a clean conscience and a true faith. In the struggle with evil, whether directly a clear consequence of our bad choice(s) or indirectly a not-so-clear intrusion into our lives, we ought not to rest until we can handle it by faith. Unlike those without hope, we don't turn off our minds and flee to some irrational anesthetic. We flee to our Creator and Savior honoring His character by trusting its love and power over all evil.