

When The Wheels Fall Off

Creating A Theology of Suffering

Dr. John Splinter

Have you ever experienced a moment when the wheels fell off and your life was turned upside down? Suddenly everything came unglued and turned wretched. Here are a few true stories:

- A missionary is swimming in a small pond – suddenly he falls face-forward and dies.
- A missionary brings home a Sexually Transmitted Disease to his wife – a lengthy career in ministry is suddenly compromised.
- A pastor suffers from painful childhood issues, and commits suicide.
- A missionary begins hearing voices and seeing things that aren't there – she refuses psychiatric examination and so her company terminates her.
- A missionary's wife and daughter are riding on a motorcycle when they're broadsided. The daughter is killed instantly; the mother survives but is severely injured.
- A missionary and his wife return to the States on furlough when he suddenly becomes ill and within three days is dead from a mysterious disease.
- A pastor's wife undergoes a medical trauma that leaves her wracked with PTSD. Her subsequent emotional distance from the church causes the pastor to be fired.

Most of us know of at least one story like that, when something precious was suddenly ripped away and someone was left with devastating loss. Why does God allow suffering? If He's truly all powerful, and all loving, and if missionaries and pastors are the tip of the spear in expanding the Kingdom of Jesus, why doesn't He protect them?

This question is much easier to answer when living in the States, surrounded by loved ones and resources. But when serving in cross-cultural missions thousands of miles from home, answers can be more difficult. This is why it's important for missionaries to truly think through their own "Theology of Suffering." Suffering is far more likely to happen on the mission field, than in the States.

Scripture is clear: God allows suffering. Christ suffered to the point of death. Isaiah was put into a hollow log which was then sawn in half. Job lost everything including wealth and children. Joseph languished in prison for several years. John the Baptist was beheaded, as was

TASK BOX ONE

1. Go to the Internet, type in "Why does God allow suffering," and read two or three authors' discussion of this theme.
2. Discuss what you've read with either your spouse, or one other person. See if you can draw any solid theological and practical conclusions from what you've read. If so, write them in summary form in the margins.

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the Apostle Paul. Peter was crucified upside down. Hebrews 11:35-38 outlines others who suffered and died.

START-UP LIST – WHY DOES GOD ALLOW SUFFERING??

Here are fifteen potential reasons why God may allow suffering in people's lives. This is by no means a comprehensive list. It's just a start-up, to get your juices flowing. Take a little time and review the following thoughts. Later in this paper you will be invited to create your own "Theology of Suffering." For right now we're just floating balloons, and backing up our hypotheses with biblical texts or thoughts.

1. Suffering should not be a surprise to Christians (Mt. 5:11-12; 1 Pet. 4:12). The Son suffered, so do those who follow the Son.
2. Suffering causes our "selves" to decrease, so that Christ may increase in us (Jn. 3:30; 2 Cor. 4:7-11; Rom. 5:3-4; Phil. 3:10). It depletes us, thereby making us dependent upon God (2 Cor. 12:9).
3. Suffering forces us to live by faith (2 Kings 6:16; 2 Tim. 1:12; 1 Thes. 4:19), and to wait on the Lord (Ps. 62:108; Isa. 40:31).
4. Suffering opens us to experience God's comfort (2 Cor. 1:3-5). Christ has a unique affection for fellow sufferers.
5. Suffering teaches us humility (2 Cor. 12:7), so that God can exalt us at the proper time (1 Pet. 5:6-7).
6. Suffering reveals what is truly in our hearts. It tests us (Jas. 1:2).
7. Suffering leads us to experience his presence in the darkness, when we cannot see his face but can sense his closeness (Ps. 23:4).
8. Suffering teaches us to trust his love. (Job 13:15; Isa. 49:15-16).
9. Suffering can be for pruning and refining (Ps. 66:8-9; Heb. 2:10; Jn. 15:1—7) which thereby promotes greater fruitfulness and spiritual depth.
10. Suffering can be discipline for disobedience and rebellion (Ps. 107:17; Prov. 3:12; Heb. 12:6-11).
11. Suffering can be used to prepare us for heaven (2 Cor. 4:17-18).
12. Suffering reminds us that Christ carried our griefs to the cross (Isa. 53:4).

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13. Suffering teaches us that God is more concerned about character, than comfort (Rom. 5:3-4; Heb. 12:10-11).
14. Suffering equips us to comfort others who suffer or are weak (2 Cor. 1:3-11).
15. Suffering reminds our hearts to look ahead. We are on a pilgrimage that ends at the temple of God (Ps. 84).

TASK BOX TWO

1. As you read the fifteen items listed above, other thoughts or “reasons why God may allow suffering” may come to your mind. Add these as margin notes.
2. Other verses may also come to mind. Add these at the end of whichever of the 15 items they may fit, or add them as margin notes beside your addendums, or, just write them down as free-floating margin notes. (You’re not doing this to show or impress anyone – you’re doing it to be of help to yourself sometime down the road.)

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

Write your answers to the following questions as you develop your own personal “Theology of Suffering.”

A. Why did God the Father allow Christ to suffer? _____

B. What is there in suffering, that creates depth of character and strength of faith? _____

C. Do we grow spiritually when the seas are calm and the sun is shining? (One-word answer not acceptable – chew on this one a bit.) _____

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D. Describe how God called you to the mission field. _____

E. What are your greatest fears when it comes to serving Christ on the field, and suffering? _

F. What suffering or losses might have the power to cause you to rescind your call and return to the States permanently? _____

G. How do you “practice the presence of Christ” in your daily life? _____

H. What three or four scripture texts are most meaningful to you as you ponder the issue of suffering for Christ?

- a. _____
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b.

c.

d.

- I. If married, are you and your spouse spiritually joined and BOTH committed to facing sufferings and yet remaining in service to Christ? Talk about this and write your answers.

- J. What other thoughts have come to mind as you have answered these questions? Make notes for future reference:

a.

b.

c.

d.

SUGGESTIONS FOR WHEN THE WHEELS FALL OFF

There is no easy way to face major life losses such as those in the bullet-point examples with which this paper was begun. However, there are things that one can do to survive these wretched moments.

1. Consider Isaiah 40:31 – *They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.*

This text was the one chosen by a pastor whose daughter died of leukemia after a long and hard struggle. One of the thoughts he presented in his funeral sermon, was that during those horrendous weeks and months of struggle, there were times when he and his wife didn't have the ability to "soar on wings like eagles," nor did they have the energy to "run and not be weary." He said that at best, they had the strength to put one weary foot in front of the other, and plod through each painful day, one step at a time.

But, he said, even in the worst of the worst days, he and his wife were blessed by the strong presence of Jesus-the-Comforter – even when they saw pain and death in their daughter's eyes. The "valley of the shadow of death" was very real to them, but so also was the presence of Jesus, even in the darkness.

2. Wrap loved-ones around you. If you are suffering, don't try to be tough and go it alone. There is blessed comfort in knowing those who love you are praying for you, and weeping with you.

I lost my father in an airplane crash. I was 13. The morning after his death, one of the most meaningful events in my life occurred when a childhood friend came to our home with two candy bars. He and I went to my room, sat together eating the candy bars, and weeping. I will always love Gerry Nemeth for that precious act of caring. He comforted me simply with his presence. His family was dirt poor, to the point that buying two candy bars was a luxury, which made the moment even more precious.

At my father's graveside, the cold winter morning was made warmer by the hugs and tears of friends saying "We love you – we're here for you – we weep with you."

There is a well-researched correlation demonstrating people who have friends and loved-ones "with them" (even though thousands of miles away) during times of crisis, thereby gaining the resilience to walk through those pain-filled days of loss, to then return to serving Christ. Don't go it alone. Draw your loved ones in as close as you may. Rest in their love and prayers.

SUMMARY THOUGHTS

You now have a preliminary, personal “Theology of Suffering.” You may wish to return to this paper from time to time, make margin notes, add scripture texts which the Lord has given you. Some missionaries have careers without calamities – indeed, most do. Yet even if there are no terrible calamities, yet testing does come, and there are seasons in which all Christ-followers will struggle. Sometimes the struggles are due to personal growth issues, but sometimes they’re born of enormous losses.

Keep this paper someplace where you can bring it out and review your thoughts, especially if major struggles emerge. May the Lord use His Word and His Presence to guide, heal, and empower you in your service to Christ.

Dr. John Splinter
Director, Staff Development
Global Grace Fellowship