

God Has Chosen Us In The Furnace Of Affliction

'Behold, I have refined you but not as silver. I have chosen you in the Furnace of Affliction' (Isaiah 48:10).

'My child, do not despise the discipline of the Lord, neither become weary with His reproof, for whom the Lord loves He corrects as a father corrects the child in whom he delights' (Proverbs 3:11 & 12). 'Whoever loves correction loves knowledge, but they who hate reproof are stupid' (Proverbs 12:1).

'Many will purify themselves and make themselves white and be refined, but the wicked will do wickedly and none of the wicked will understand, but the teachers (of the Word) and those who are wise will understand' (Daniel 12:10).

'Beloved, do not be amazed (astonished or bewildered) at the fiery trial which is taking place to test your quality as though something strange was happening to you. You are sharing Jesus' sufferings. Rejoice, so when His glory is revealed you may rejoice with exceeding joy ... Let them who suffer according to the will of God, entrust their souls to Him as to a faithful Creator' (1 Peter 4:12, 13 & 19).

'Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten them. Be zealous and repent' (Revelation 3:19). 'These are the believers who have come out of great tribulation and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (Revelation 7:14).

The chastening of the Lord is not a popular topic because many Christians choose to believe they will have a 'happy clappy' prosperous, carefree life until God takes them home to glory. That concept of Christianity is far from scriptural, and we only need to read in the New Testament about how much Christians are disciplined in the form of suffering, to realise how wrong that teaching is. We need to accept the uncomfortable truth; the Bible says it is God's will for us to suffer because Jesus suffered. As joint heirs with Jesus, we must share in His suffering if we are to share in His glory (Romans 8:17), because a disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his Lord (Matthew 10:24). The opposite of that is, if we refuse to share His suffering, then we can never share in His glory. Genuine Christians go through a fiery furnace of suffering and testing. It is hard to comprehend that it is God's will for people to suffer and that suffering is part of His plan for mankind while we are on earth. Before you scream, "That is not what I have been taught," have a look at the scriptures written throughout the Bible to back that statement up. For some people who prefer the easy way out, that is too difficult to accept. Sometimes God chastens us severely, and the Lord is sorely testing many who are reading this text today. Suffering is not a superficial subject; it is a subject with eternal consequences.

There are five different reasons for our suffering. (1) Sometimes our suffering is a direct result of our sin, but that is between the Lord and us and nobody has the right or the authority to judge us because we are all sinners. The Lord Jesus is our Judge and no person has that mandate. (2) On occasions we suffer the consequences of our own foolish decisions or actions, and if we do something incredibly stupid, we cannot blame God or the devil for it. We need to take responsibility for our own actions. (3) There are some instances when the sin or stupidity of others bring terrible suffering to innocent people. (4) Other times our righteous suffering is to align our walk with God, with Jesus' walk with God, as joint heirs of earthly suffering and later, heavenly glory. Righteous suffering is how the Lord tests our faith and purifies us. (5) Occasionally, the Lord allows us to come under attack from the devil but the Lord always has a purpose for that level of intense suffering. There are two verses that make us aware that the Lord allows the devil to attack His chosen people. One reason is to teach people to have more respect for the Godhead and not to blaspheme, and the other reason is to teach us to forgive others.

We will talk about suffering for sin first. When the Lord deals with sin, He goes about it in stages. First He will convict us of sin. The Holy Spirit will make us feel uncomfortable about something we are doing. That may occur several times. If we ignore the Holy Spirit, He will use people to say something to us and He uses the Bible to prod our awareness of sin. He gives us several chances to stop what we are doing. If we continue to ignore His correcting and promptings, then He might bring about an event that shakes us up to the point where we will listen and obey. For example, if there is someone who loves their possessions, then the Lord may allow their home to be plundered to teach them He is far more important than earthly possessions. If people love their pet more than they love God, then the Lord may destroy that pet, or He may allow the Christian to suffer illness until they put the Lord back on the throne. If there is a man who refuses to work and provide for his family, then the Lord may bring him to poverty and financial hardship until he learns his lesson. The Lord promises to hear us every time we pray, however, sometimes situations in our lives can

delay the answer to prayer, or the Lord is doing a deep work in our lives that we cannot perceive, or the prayer might be correct but the timing wrong. If we pray and ask with the wrong motive or attitude, or if we whinge and complain, God will not give us what we want. If we delight ourselves in the Lord, then He will give us the desires of our hearts (Psalm 37:4). If however, those desires are carnal, then we will not receive them. 'Make no provision for the flesh' (Romans 13:14). 'Do you ask and fail to receive? Because you ask with the wrong motive. Your intention is to use it for your pleasures' (James 4:3). 'When we cry and shout for help, God sometimes shuts out our prayers ... He covers Himself with a cloud so no prayer can get through' (Lamentations 3:8 & 44). Only sin brings those particular negative results, but we have the promise, 'If we freely admit that we have sinned and confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9).

Some people have a marvellous conversion filled with joy, exuberance and peace. They instantly realise how good it is to be in the presence of the Lord. Some people enjoy a 'honeymoon' phase then after a few months the Lord starts to work on their sin and wrong attitudes. It is sin that separates us from God so He deals with the sin in our lives, and the less sin we have as a barrier, the closer God is to us and the more intimately we know Him. We are all born with a sinful nature and God purges that sin out of our lives, sometimes very painfully. Remember, He chastens those whom He loves and if He does not chasten us, then we are not His children. We are not to resent the chastening of the Lord. How we respond to His chastening may determine whether we grow up in God, or shrink away from Him. If we give up and do not see God's refining process through to the end, then we will be unchanged and may have to endure similar circumstances over and over again until we learn to submit to God. God repeatedly calls us to endure His chastening and not become weary. If we allow God's chastening to correct and change us, we will be able to declare His works, and we will receive a better reward in the Kingdom of God when we get there. His discipline does not always begin gently. Sometimes the sudden, harsh discipline leaves people feeling shocked, overwhelmed or devastated; they are sometimes left reeling and confused like Job was. That is usually the time when superficial Christians put the boot in and verbally kick those who are down, judging them harshly like Job's 'friends' did. That is when many people fall away and give up. Jesus said, "What was sown on the rocky places, is he who hears the Word and immediately receives it with joy. He has no root in himself and endures for a while, but when oppression or persecution arises, he falls" (Matthew 13:20 & 21). We should never give up just because Christian life is tough.

There are some occasions when the sin of others causes us suffering, but in these instances we can ask the Lord for divine intervention and deliverance. For example, the sin of a violent or alcoholic husband can bring terrible suffering on an innocent family, especially the children. The sin of rebellious teenagers can cause awful heartache for their parents. A person driving too fast or dangerously causing a dreadful accident can bring misery to innocent people. There are many other occasions when the sin of others cause misery but by praying for the sinner, we can bring about our deliverance from the situation. Jesus said, "Bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you and pray for those who mistreat and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). 'Do not seek revenge beloved, but make room for God's wrath, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine. I will repay", says the Lord. "If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty give him a drink, for in doing so you will heap coals of fire on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (Romans 12:19 to 21). If a man mistreats his wife, his prayers will be hindered or cut off (1 Peter 3:7).

Our own foolish behaviour or bad decisions can make us end up in deep trouble, but we have nobody to blame but ourselves. People almost always want to blame somebody else for every sad event that happens, but few people will take responsibility for their own actions. The 'blame game' began with Adam. Adam blamed God for giving him Eve, then he blamed Eve for giving him the fruit. Eve blamed the devil for deceiving her. Neither of them said, "Yes Lord. I disobeyed You." That attitude prevails to this day. If an event occurs because of our own doing, we must take full responsibility. That is what repentance is all about. Repentance is our admission of wrongdoing and God expects us to take responsibility for it. When we do something that causes a calamity, we cannot blame God. For example, if we lose our job because we abused our employer, that would be our own fault. If we struggle financially afterwards, that suffering would be a result of our own foolish actions. Once we have repented of our foolishness, we can ask the Lord to help us find new employment, and hopefully we learned a lesson. If a person becomes involved in sexual sin, they may have to suffer the consequences for years. It is wrong to blame God when a situation is clearly our own fault. When Jesus came, He willingly took the blame for all the sin Adam and Eve brought on mankind. If God gives us a warning and we do not listen to it but proceed with our own agenda and we suffer the consequences, then we have no right to blame God. In His graciousness, He will forgive us and cover our sin just like He graciously covered Adam and Eve's nakedness. If we listen and obey we will not fall, for He is able to keep us from falling (Jude 1:24). If we ignore the written warnings the Lord has carefully

outlined in the Bible and we fall, then we must take full responsibility for our own actions, repent and change our direction. The consequences of our own actions may be dire, but we still cannot blame God for our suffering in those circumstances. He is not to blame for our foolishness. The Bible says, 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding' (Proverbs 3:5). We should allow the Lord to help us make sensible decisions so we do not endure unnecessary suffering.

Another reason for suffering is righteous suffering, or the testing of our faith in the Furnace of Affliction. Righteous suffering is intended to make us grow spiritually and mature in God. 'Remember the former days in which, after you were enlightened (born-again, saved), you endured a great struggle with sufferings' (Hebrews 10:32). Job was a consistently righteous man and his suffering was not because of sin. The Lord said it was without cause (Job 2:3). Job's suffering was not brought on by sin, but by fear. 'The thing which I greatly feared came on me and what I dreaded has happened to me. I had no peace, no quiet and no rest and the trouble came on me' (Job 3:25 & 26).

If we study what Job's 'friends' said, they sounded good and they were very religious, but they had the same incorrect doctrine we hear preached in churches today – trouble never happens to the righteous and if you have trouble then you must have sinned. That doctrine is completely wrong. Trouble happens to the righteous. The only way into the Kingdom of God is through many trials (Acts 14:22) and it is important we never lose our confidence in God due to His discipline. What did God say to Job's friends because they accused Job of sin? "My wrath is aroused against you because you have not spoken of Me what is right as My servant Job has" (Job 42:7). How many of us have been accused of sin by people in the church after we have suffered a catastrophe in our lives? They could be wrong about our suffering. If they are correct, we will need to repent but if they are wrong, it is they who need to repent. Job challenged his friends with this question, "To whom have you uttered these words? Whose spirit came forth from you?" (Job 26:4). Job was saying, "What evil spirit have you been listening to?" Just as Job's friends did, we can speak good religious words but in the wrong spirit. Their accusations were not from God but from an evil spirit! God is not impressed by religion. What we need to do in our time of strife is draw closer to God. If you are suffering an unfathomable sad event, do not listen to those who say it is because of sin. Take it to the Lord. The Lord sees our pain and tells us not to be troubled but to be joyful in spite of our woes. 'The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and His ears open to their prayer ... Even if you should suffer for being righteous, you are blessed. Do not fear, neither be troubled' (1 Peter 3:12 & 14).

God's ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8 & 9). We need to get to know God's thoughts and His ways because God is the One we have to deal with. Consider two amazing facts about Job's suffering. (1) Look how many people, animals and other things God sacrificed to reveal His absolute supremacy to just one man; Job. (2) The Bible says the Lord brought all these calamities on Job (Job 42:11). God used the devil to carry out the task. God sacrificed 11,000 animals and a very great body of servants, Job's ten adult children, his property and some buildings (Job 1:3 to 19), then God sacrificed Job's health (Job 2:7), yet he was righteous and innocent. How many of us honestly respect the Lord enough to have the same attitude Job had, or to say what Job said? 'Job fell to the ground and worshipped God ... "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." In all this Job did not sin, nor charge God with wrongdoing' (Job 1:20 to 22). "'Will we receive good at the hand of God, and will we not receive evil?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips' (Job 2:10). "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him. I will continue my own way before Him" (Job 13:15). 'He knows the way I take. When He has tried me, I will come forth as refined gold' (Job 23:10). What an incredible man Job was! That is the attitude we all need to have during our trials. None of Job's children had done anything wrong, but the Lord allowed them to perish. Look closely at the words of Job, "Will we receive good at the hand of God and will we not receive evil?" That is something Christians really do not want to hear. This Bible verse says some righteous people will receive evil at the hands of God. God thinks differently to the way we do. God does things differently to the way we do things; so differently in fact that some people become confused, angry and some actually walk away from Him. His values are different, His standards are different and we need to get to know His higher thoughts and ways.

When God personally spoke to Job out of the whirlwind on two occasions (Job 38:1; 40:6), that solved all Job's problems. Job was always righteous and was the most righteous man on earth at that time in history, always maintaining his integrity and God acknowledged that (Job 1:1; 1:8; 2:3; Ezekiel 14:14 & 20) but after Job had a revelation of God's holiness, His awesome majesty, and a long face to face conversation with God, it completely changed Job's heart and he said he had seen God with his eyes (Job 42:5). It is clear Job had a direct, personal encounter with the Lord and as a result, was a changed man. After the whirlwinds, Job had no more questions and no more complaints. What we all need is a direct, personal encounter and

revelation of the Lord. That is the only thing that will release our anxiety and quiet our questioning. Once Job acknowledged his frail humanity and repented (Job 42:6), God gave back to Job double of all he had. Job ended up with 22,000 animals and ten more children. Why did Job receive double the animals but not double the children? One reason could have been that Mrs Job did not want to go through childbirth more than twenty times. After all, they did not have pain relief then. Another reason was because the first ten children were not lost eternally; they had gone on ahead of Job. They were also righteous. Job and his wife will enjoy the Kingdom of God in the company of their twenty children. That can be a comfort to those who have lost righteous loved ones ... in reality they are not lost, they have gone on ahead of us. It is a temporary separation and we will meet them again, although losing the ones we love can be devastating. 'We call those blessed who have endured. You have heard of the patience of Job and you have seen the outcome, the Lord's purpose and how He blessed him in the end. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy' (James 5:11).

What did God seek to achieve by putting Job through all that suffering and pain? What was His purpose? The highest that God has to offer us, is the revelation of Himself, His holiness, His awesome power, His immense creativity, and that is the spiritual place to where God brought Job. It took a whole lot of suffering Job could not understand, but God was working through it all to bring Job to the place where God could reveal His true wondrous character. That is the highest privilege and honour God can give to any of us. When we have dreadful trouble in our lives, we can remember God is working through our suffering to bring us to a place whereby He can reveal Himself afresh to us in a new and deeper way. The revelation of God is inexhaustible and we will go on learning more about Him. The revelation of Himself is the greatest blessing God has to offer to His chosen people, and it is very exciting. Everything God has created, in some way, reveals His majesty to us (Romans 1:20).

Many Christians have situations that take place, that are impossible to understand. When Christians go through awful trials, they often ask questions like: "Why? Why did this happen when I prayed so much? How could the Lord let this happen? Why does the Lord let this situation go on and on? Can He not see our suffering? Does He not care any more?" There is nothing wrong with asking why. Wanting to have an answer to a question is not wrong or sinful. Often people get to a point where they do not want to know 'why' any more, they just want the pain to stop. The Lord did not answer Job's questions but we have something Job did not have – we have the Word of God to answer our question of 'why'. The scriptural answer to why God allows so much suffering is hard for us mortal humans to grasp, and because it is so hard to comprehend, most people dismiss it out of hand and say, "God would not do that!" Yes, He would and He does. It is His will for us to suffer with Jesus but none of us will suffer as much as He did.

We have looked at five reasons why we suffer and now we will look at God's purposes for our suffering. The Bible gives us at least twelve different purposes why we have to endure righteous suffering. We will go through these twelve purposes but there are more. Righteous suffering is not a consequence of our sin, consequences of bad decisions, bad behaviour or sinful actions of others. Christians and non-Christians alike, suffer the consequences of their own bad decisions. Righteous suffering is unique, in that only the righteous endures it. One example is persecution of genuine Christians who refuse to compromise or renounce their faith under immense pressure by non-Christians. Righteous suffering is what the Lord uses to make us mature in Him. It tests our faith and forces us to endure. These are the purposes for trials and suffering we can find in the scriptures.

Purpose number one: Suffering makes us holy. There are about six hundred different verses that declare God's holiness. It is His desire is for us to become holy and He says that in both the Old and the New Testaments. "I am the Lord your God. Sanctify yourselves and be holy for I am holy. Do not defile yourselves with any manner of unholy thing ... You shall be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44 & 45). "You shall be holy to Me for I, the Lord am holy and have set you apart from people so you are Mine" (Leviticus 20:26). 'As the One Who called you is holy, you must be holy in all your conduct, for it is written, "You shall be holy for I am holy"' (1 Peter 1:15 & 16). 'God has not called us to impurity but to sanctification. Whoever rejects this, rejects not man but God, Who has given us His Holy Spirit' (1 Thessalonians 4:7 & 8).

There are many other characteristics of God but holiness is the most unique. Holiness is not possible without righteousness and there is no other source of holiness. People who do not know God do not know holiness. Holiness depends on receiving a revelation of God and if we earnestly seek God, He will reveal His holiness to us. There is a difference between righteousness and holiness. Many Christians are righteous, but how many understand the concept of the holiness and absolute purity of God? There is nothing that the Charismatic movement needs more at this time, than a full awareness of the holiness of God and His desire for us to be holy too. None of us can be as holy as God, but He gives us the strength to forsake that which

causes us to sin. The theme around the throne of God is holiness. 'I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above Him stood the seraphim; each had six wings, with two he covered his own face, and with two he covered his feet and with two he flew, and one cried to another and said, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts. The whole earth is filled with His glory"' (Isaiah 6:1 to 3). The four living creatures who are cherubim (Ezekiel 11:22) never stop saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, Who was and Who is and Who is to come." The twenty-four elders worship the Lord God saying, "Worthy are You our Lord and God the Holy One, to receive glory, honour and power, for You created all things and because of Your will they exist and were created!" (Revelation 4:8 to 11).

Purpose number two: Suffering is God's way of disciplining and chastising us to increase our righteousness. We are not to think suffering is strange, nor is it an attack of the devil, although sometimes the Lord uses the devil to carry out the task. Some people cannot accept that God scourges, corrects, disciplines and chastises those whom He loves. If we believe that He loves us, then we need to believe that He will chastise us. 'Do not resent the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage and give up when you are reproved by Him, for the Lord corrects everyone whom He loves, and He punishes, even scourges everyone whom He receives. You must submit and endure discipline. God is dealing with you as with children ... No chastening brings joy but seems grievous, but afterwards yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness in those who have been trained by it' (Hebrews 12:5 to 11). Suffering also deals with our pride. Apostle Paul was buffeted so much he pleaded three times for the Lord to ease his suffering, but the Lord allowed Paul to be tested by the devil to keep him humble and not become proud of the incredible revelations he was receiving. 'By reason of the exceeding greatness of the revelations, so I should not be puffed up, there was given to me a 'thorn in the flesh', a messenger of Satan to torment me so I should not be excessively proud' (2 Corinthians 12:7).

Purpose number three: Suffering will refine us and make us fit and worthy for the holy Kingdom of God for eternity with a holy and righteous God. Suffering purifies us like gold. 'Give thanks to the Father Who made us fit to be partakers of the inheritance of God's people in Light' (Colossians 1:12). 'Jesus gave Himself for us so He might redeem/cleanse us from all iniquity and purify for Himself a people for His Own possession, zealous for good works' (Titus 2:14). 'This is an obvious sign of the righteous judgment of God, so you may be counted worthy of the Kingdom of God, for which you suffer' (2 Thessalonians 1:5). Jesus gave Himself on our behalf to redeem us from all iniquity and purify us for Himself. If we draw close to God, He will draw closer to us. We are told to purify our hearts (James 4:8). 'You should greatly rejoice, though for a little while you may be distressed by trials so the genuineness of your faith may be tested, which is more precious than gold that is purified by fire' (1 Peter 1:6 & 7).

Purpose number four: Suffering produces patience, perseverance, Godly character and hope. 'We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering brings perseverance, perseverance proves character and character produces hope' (Romans 5:3 & 4). 'If, when you do well you patiently endure suffering, this is commendable with God' (1 Peter 2:20).

Purpose number five: Suffering produces righteous perfection by faith, it strengthens us and settles our spirit. 'May the God of all grace Who called you to His eternal glory by Jesus, perfect, establish, strengthen and settle you, after you have suffered a little while' (1 Peter 5:10). 'Having these promises beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord' (2 Corinthians 7:1). 'I press on toward the goal for the prize of the high calling of God in Jesus. Let us, as many as are perfect, think this way. If you think otherwise, God will reveal that to you' (Philippians 3:14 & 15).

Purpose number six: It is to humble us and bring us closer to God; into a deeper relationship with Him. When we are suffering we cry out to God and that humbles us. If we are teachable, we will learn from trials. God insists we turn away from all wickedness and iniquity. 'You will remember the way your God led you forty years in the wilderness so He might humble you, to prove you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. He humbled you and allowed you to hunger ... so He might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but by every Word that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord does man live' (Deuteronomy 8:2 & 3). 'If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, forgive their sin and heal their land. My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to prayer offered in this place' (2 Chronicles 7:14 & 15).

Purpose number seven: Trials show us God can deliver us and makes clear to us how trustworthy and faithful the Lord is. 'Many are the afflictions (and trials) of the righteous, but the Lord delivers the righteous out of them all' (Psalm 34:19). 'Ascribe greatness to our God! Our Rock. His work is perfect for all His ways

are just. A God of faithfulness, without iniquity, just and upright is He' (Deuteronomy 32:3 & 4). 'You are righteous, Lord our God. Your judgments are upright. You have commanded Your statutes in righteousness. They are fully trustworthy' (Psalm 119:137 & 138). No matter what difficulties we endure, how traumatic or long lasting, we must remember God is always faithful. He will strengthen us and set us on a firm foundation, and He will guard us from the evil one (2 Thessalonians 3:3).

Purpose number eight: Trials and obedient service purify us and make us ready for the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. 'Let us rejoice and be exceedingly glad. Let us give the glory to Jesus, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His wife has made herself ready. She was permitted to array herself in bright, pure, fine linen, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of God's people. Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb' (Revelation 19:7 to 9).

Purpose number nine: Suffering causes us to become unquestioningly obedient. Many people do not realise obedience is a matter of life and death. Our obedience shows how much we love the Lord and in turn, He will love us for our obedience. 'Obey the voice of the Lord Who speaks to you, then it will be well with you and your soul will live (for eternity)' (Jeremiah 38:20). 'I (the Lord) call heaven and earth to witness this day, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, so you may live, you and your children. Love the Lord your God, obey His voice and cleave to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days' (Deuteronomy 30:19 & 20). Jesus said, "Those who keep My commandments, loves Me. Those who love Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will reveal Myself to him" (John 14:21).

Purpose number ten: Righteous suffering is intended to make us grow spiritually and mature in God. Suffering teaches us to be joyful in all circumstances. We must accept the Lord never ceases from testing our faith, loyalty, patience and perseverance. We must lack no spiritual attribute. 'Consider it wholly joyful my brethren, whenever you have trials of any kind. Be assured that the trial or testing of your faith produces endurance, and let endurance to do its perfect work so you may be fully grown, lacking in nothing ... Blessed is the man who is patient under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the victor's crown of life, which God has promised to those who love Him' (James 1:2 to 4 & 12).

Purpose number eleven: We must learn to respect and honour the Godhead and not blaspheme. There are many ways in which people blaspheme in this modern day, and if we do that, God will give us over to the devil until we have learned not to speak lightly of Him. 'To the King Eternal, immortal, invisible, to God Who alone is wise, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen. This command I commit to you ... so you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience which some having thrust away, made a shipwreck concerning their faith, of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander whom I delivered to Satan, so they might be taught not to blaspheme' (1 Timothy 1:17 to 20).

Purpose number twelve: Unforgiveness can bring us prolonged suffering. When we refuse to forgive anyone, God will give us over to demonic tormentors until we learn to forgive. 'His Lord was angry and delivered him to the tormentors until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father will also do to you, if you do not each forgive your brethren from your hearts for their misdeeds' (Matthew 18:34 & 35).

Regardless of the cause for our suffering, the Lord will never forsake us during our trials. "I will in no way leave you, neither will I in any way forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). He is with us during every trial, just like He stood with the three young men who were in the real furnace. 'King Nebuchadnezzar commanded certain mighty men who were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and cast them into the burning fiery furnace ... These three men fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace, then Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He asked his counsellors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?" They answered the king, "True O king." Nebuchadnezzar said, "Look I see four men loose walking in the midst of the fire and they have no harm, and the aspect of the fourth is like the Son of God"' (Daniel 3:20 to 25).

Now we have some answers to why bad things still happen even when we pray. Why should we keep on praying when life gets tough? We need to pray for two good reasons, (1) We need to keep connected to God and (2) Jesus prayed. If Jesus needed to pray – and He is God's Son, then how much more do we need to pray? The need to connect to God through prayer is the most important aspect of our Christian walk. We need to humble ourselves to pray and seek God. Prayer brings forgiveness from sin; it brings healing and helps build our relationship with God. We need to pray every day and we know He always hears us when we speak to Him. He hears us before we have uttered a word, but He does not always answer our prayers in the

way we want or as fast as we want. Sometimes terrible situations go on for years. We must understand this important fact: We must obey God; He does not have to obey us!

Childless couples suffer from that situation in a way people with children can seldom comprehend. God always hears us when we pray, but sometimes He makes us wait for years before He grants our petition like He did with Sarah (Genesis 17:16 to 19; 21:1 to 7); Rachel (Genesis 29:31 & 30:22); Hannah (1 Samuel 1:5 to 28) and Elisabeth (Luke 1:5 to 80), making them all wait until they were desperate before allowing them to have a child, but in each case, timing was of the essence. Couples who desire a baby can take comfort from knowing God can make it happen, if it is His will. 'This is the confidence we have in Him. If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us' (1 John 5:14).

Another terrible form of suffering is a missing child. God allowed Jacob to grieve for many years for his son Joseph, before Jacob found out he was alive in Egypt (Genesis 37:1 through to 47:9). Joseph's ten older brothers could have told Jacob, but they were so guilty of what they did to Joseph, they never said a word. Jacob had a close relationship with the Lord, so the Lord could have told Jacob that Joseph was alive, but He never said a word either. Once Joseph was out of prison he could have sent word to his father to say he was alive and well, but chose not to, leaving Jacob to mourn for several years.

There are many other examples written in the scriptures when God made people wait for His timing before He answered their prayers for deliverance. Sometimes we need to wait to see what God says regarding a matter (Numbers 9:8). Sometimes He made His people ask repeatedly (1 Kings 18:43 & 44); or there was something holding up the answer (Daniel 10:12 & 13); or He made them do something before the answer would come (2 Kings 5:1 to 15). Another hindrance to having prayers answered is doubt (James 1:6 & 7). Our answer may be just delayed, not refused. Sometimes our suffering is due to our own impatience. We must tell the Lord exactly what we want and trust Him to work it out in His way and in His time. When we are waiting for an answer, we must resist the urge to 'help' God like Abraham did when he produced Ishmael.

God hears us even when His answer is "No" like when Jesus prayed three times for God to 'take the cup' from Him and He became exceedingly distressed about the upcoming crucifixion (Luke 22:42 to 44). Jesus had the attitude, 'Not My will but Yours be done'. As hard as it can be, that is the attitude we also need to have, even if we suffer for it. When Paul suffered with the situation he called the 'thorn in his flesh', he asked God three times to remove it but God said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you." (2 Corinthians 12:8 & 9). Those two answers were a resounding "No." We can pray as fervently as we want, but if God says "No" then He means "No" and our suffering will continue if we hold on to what God has already refused. We need to seek out and pray wholly in God's will. That is in perfect agreement with His overall plan. We need to bring our will in line with God's will. How do we know if what we are asking for is His will or not? If we walk closely with God, we can pray and ask what His will is, the Holy Spirit will reveal it and give us peace. If we are still unsure, then we need to be certain our request does not contradict the Bible nor is out of the character of God. We need His guidance because some requests may not be found in the Bible. For example, we may be living in a situation that is unsustainable and we want to move away. In a situation like that, guidance is needed because there is no direct scripture to move house or stay. There is one verse we could loosely use for guidance. 'Prepare your belongings for removal and move out by day' (Ezekiel 12:3).

There are times when God does not make sense to us when He refuses our requests, especially when we know what we are asking for is fully within His will, but He is the Lord of the whole universe, He owns everything – including us – and He does whatever He pleases (Psalm 115:3). God does as He pleases and whatever He chooses, so who can oppose Him? (Job 23:13). God does not give account for any of His actions. 'Why do you strive against God because He does not give account for any of His matters?' (Job 33:13). He is God and He does not have to answer to us, but we must give an account of our lives to Him. We all know of situations or the sense of frustration when we cry out to God, but He does not respond in the way we want Him to. There are many examples, such as when someone dies after much prayer for healing, when we know healing is His will and the death of the person leaves young children without their mother. Just recently, a born-again, God loving, healthy, athletic woman died suddenly, leaving a shattered husband and three very young children to live all their lives without their delightfully loving mother. How can that be explained? Or when a fit and healthy young person prays and asks God to help him find work, yet is rejected from more than 1,000 job applications for no apparent reason, when we know God says, "If a man will not work, neither let Him eat," (2 Thessalonians 3:10), so we know employment is God's will and crippling poverty is a dreadful form of suffering. Or when a person who loves the Lord with all their heart, is suffering incessant pain or a crippling disease, or worse, develops a serious, baffling mental illness when God says He will heal all our diseases. Or when a woman who has waited years for a Christian husband, is left a

widow after just a couple of years of marriage, with a baby on the way. Or a Christian, completely innocent of any wrongdoing, is arrested, convicted and imprisoned. These are just a few examples of when the Lord does not make sense to us, and there are many more scenarios we could add here. Sometimes inexplicable trials like these can cause a Christian to turn away from God, but that is never the answer.

We are not to be anxious and need to trust God no matter what happens, as did the early Christians when they suffered terrible losses, were persecuted and imprisoned. They trusted God because they held on to the promise of the rewards we will all receive in the Kingdom of God. We need to see that life is not about what happens on earth – it is about eternity. ‘You suffered along with those who were imprisoned, and you bore cheerfully the plundering of your belongings and the confiscation of your property, in the knowledge that you have a better and lasting possession. Do not fling away your fearless confidence, for it carries a great and glorious compensation of reward. You have need of steadfast patience so that you may perform and fully accomplish the will of God, and thus receive what is promised’ (Hebrews 10:34 to 36). What was promised? Compensation of reward; eternal life with all the rewards that go with being faithful to God in the face of terrible suffering. ‘Do not fret or be anxious about anything, but in every circumstance, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, continue to make your wants known to God, and God’s peace which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Jesus our Messiah’ (Philippians 4:6 & 7). We are told, ‘to thank God in every circumstance, for this is the will of God for you who are in Jesus’ (1 Thessalonians 5:18). No matter what we are suffering, we must thank God. We all need to have the correct attitude and not grumble about our lot. There may be something God wants to deal with in our lives, and the only way that can be achieved is by ‘breaking’ us. Jesus makes no apologies for that. “Everyone who falls on that Stone (Jesus) will be broken in pieces; but on whomever It falls, It will crush him as dust” (Luke 20:18).

We need to hang on to the truth of what we will receive after we go home to be with the Lord, no matter what trials we face here on earth. ‘The Holy Spirit testifies together with our own spirit, we are children of God and if we are His children then we are joint heirs with Jesus, only we must share His suffering if we are to share His glory. I consider the sufferings of this life are not worth being compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us’ (Romans 8:16 to 18). We are to take our share of the suffering for the Gospel (2 Timothy 1:8), we are to take our share of the suffering as a good soldier of Jesus (2 Timothy 2:3), we are to be calm and suffer unflinchingly to do the work of an evangelist (2 Timothy 4:5).

Happiness and joy are completely different. Happiness is earthly pleasure, joy is spiritual fulfilment. Surprising as it may seem to some people, it is not written once in the New Testament, we will be happy with life, but the scriptures do speak of our sufferings, hardships, trials, testing and endurance more than 400 times. The early Christians were told right from the start of their Christian walk, something that modern Christians run away from, ‘Stand firm in the faith, for it is through many hardships, afflictions, trials and tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God’ (Acts 14:22). Immediately after Paul was converted he was told what great things he would suffer for the Lord’s sake (Acts 9:16). How many people would keep the faith if we were told on the day of our conversion we would suffer greatly? Nearly everybody would turn and walk away. Some people within the modern Western church are far too soft. God says we are to rejoice in the Lord always (Philippians 4:4), we are to be content with what we have (Philippians 4:11), and we are to have joy and peace (Romans 15:13). That is one scripture regarding joy, but there are about 190 more. Jesus said we could have an abundant life (John 10:10), but abundant does not mean happy as some people teach, it means to have a plentiful and busy life – busy serving God. It is difficult to understand how we can be suffering yet filled with joy at the same time. ‘We commend ourselves in every way as true servants of God, through great endurance, in tribulations, afflictions, suffering, hardships, privations, distresses, sore straits, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger ... as grieved and mourning but we are always rejoicing’ (2 Corinthians 6:4, 5 & 10). As we can see, joy is spiritual fulfilment and has nothing to do with being happy. Paul would not have been happy about being in prison, in chains, feeling cold and hungry, but he was filled with joy.

We need to know that in our suffering, the Lord never says, “Ohh. You poor Dear.” No matter what we are suffering, God may feel empathy but He does not feel sorry for us. Quite the opposite in fact. ‘So then brace up your drooping hands and strengthen your feeble knees’ (Hebrews 12:12). ‘My grace is enough for you’ (2 Corinthians 12:9). When Job went through his terrible trials he cried out to God and the answer God gave him was, “Brace yourself like a man and I will demand of you, and you will answer Me” (Job 38:3; 40:7), then God rebuked Job for complaining. The children of Israel suffered many devastating hardships. They ran out of water (Exodus 15:22 to 27; 17:1 to 6), they ran out of meat (Exodus 16:3 & 13), they had to fight wars (Exodus 17:8 to 16, Numbers chapter 21; Judges 3:1), they had to get up and pack all their belongings and move on, every time the fire or the cloud of protection moved – even in the middle of the night (Numbers

9:16 to 23) – and they never knew when they would have to move nor where they were going. Their lives must have been incredibly difficult, yet when they cried because of their hardships, God became angry with them. In His anger at their complaining against Him and their disobedience, sometimes hundreds or even thousands of them died in a single day by way of bushfire (Numbers 11:1), food poisoning (Numbers 11:20 & 33), earthquake and lightning (Numbers 16:30 to 35), epidemic or 'plague' (Numbers 16:49; 25:9) and snake bites (Numbers 21:6). No matter what our difficulties, complaining does not achieve anything except to make the Lord very angry, and rather than receiving our requests, life may even become worse.

Jesus was perfect and sinless, yet willingly went through a horrible, painful, dreadful ordeal and death for us, but He did not complain once, even when He knew God the Father would not remove the 'cup' from Him. Because Jesus went through extreme agony for us, in return, we also need to suffer for Him. Unfortunately for us, because of our inherent sin, God cleanses us and that process can be very painful indeed, but we need to focus on the outcome, not the testing. The Apostles also went through terrible trials, but they recognised it as God dealing with their sin and purifying them, even though they were all righteous men. Suffering is God's will for us and we are to rejoice and not be amazed by it. God actually chooses to put us through the 'fire' of affliction. People who are taught that we will be 'happy clappy' Christians all our lives and nothing bad will ever happen, are in for a terrible shock when God does begin to deal with their lives. They can become disillusioned and confused, and will have no consolation and may collapse at a time of stress and pain. It is an incorrect view of scripture to say that we will always understand what God is doing in our lives. We cannot comprehend how suffering and disappointment can fit into His plan, but it does. If we are not made aware of this, then sooner or later we will come to a point of bewilderment or dismay. Jesus said when the storms come, not if they come. Storms mean suffering or trials. Jesus said people who are not prepared for trouble are foolish and stupid, but those who are prepared are called wise (Matthew 7:24 to 27). And often, just as we think we cannot take any more, God does not release us from the pressure; He just makes us stronger and more able to endure. 'Fear not for I am with you. Do not look around you in terror and be dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you to difficulties, yes I will help you, yes I will hold you up with My right hand of righteousness ... For I the Lord your God holds your right hand. I am the Lord Who says to you, "Fear not, I will help you"' (Isaiah 41:10 & 13). 'He Who created you and Who formed you says, "Fear not for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned nor will the flame scorch you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. You are precious and honoured in My sight, and I love you"' (Isaiah 43:1 to 4).

So we are to be prepared to suffer, but ... the Lord says He will help us, and will be with us, and will hold on to us, and we are not to fear. He will never leave us nor forsake us (1 Kings 8:57; Hebrews 13:5). God usually delivers us out of painful or difficult situations eventually, but not always. Usually, the Lord will leave us in the difficult situation until we develop the right attitude, and the mind-set He is targeting has been identified, confessed and forgiven. Once that has taken place, then deliverance from the situation will usually come. Some people though, will suffer all their lives and are only released from their plight at their death. We all need to be prepared to endure trials and difficulties. Being a committed Christian is the hardest life on earth. It takes a lot of character, humility and complete trust in and submission to God, to be able to accept difficulties as being good for us. Sometimes those difficulties are unbearable, but our lives are not for this earth – our lives are for eternity with God. We need to always focus on our eternal lives and not on the cares of this world. Understanding that our suffering is God's will and plan for mankind while we are on earth, is too much for some people. They refuse to accept it and go on asking 'why'? They feel angry and betrayed, become bitter and resentful and some could end up turning away from God instead of submitting to His discipline. 'Look carefully lest there be anyone who falls short of the grace of God, lest any root of bitterness spring up and trouble you, and defile many' (Hebrews 12:15). Those who turn away will lose their eternal rewards.

Summing up: Yes, God punishes, scourges, disciplines, corrects, trains and chastises us because He loves us. Is this fun? No, it is grievous and painful but the scriptures tell us God does it to bring righteousness. Our days are numbered and are wholly in God's control (Job 14:5). God is in total control and nothing happens without God allowing it or even doing it – but always for a reason. We must trust Him in our sorrow as much as in our joyful times. 'What shall we conclude then? Is there injustice with God? Certainly not! God said to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Exodus 33:19) ... So then He has mercy on whom He wills and He hardens whom He wills. You will say to me, "Why then does He still find fault and blame us for sin? Who can withstand His will?" But who are you to criticise God? Will what is formed ask Him who formed it, "Why have you made me thus?" Has the potter no right over the clay?' (Isaiah 29:16; 45:9; Romans 9:14 to 21).

Suffering refines us like gold so we will have no defects. Our goal is to be like Jesus, and when we see Him we will be like Him, for we will see Him just as He is, and everyone who has this hope on Him, cleanses and purifies himself, just as Jesus is pure (1 John 3:2 & 3). As long as we are on earth, we will have tests, trials, afflictions, persecutions and difficulties, all unique to us personally and there is nothing we can do about it but endure the trials, knowing at the end, we will have eternal life and the suffering will be over forever. Through all our trials and good times, we need to have a strong, steadfast prayer life with plenty of praise and worship (James 5:13). We need to have enough trust in God to see that He is doing us good in the long term. Suffering can be grievous, but our heavenly rewards are great. We are being made fit for the Kingdom of God. We need to submit to His chastisement and correction, and allow Him to purify us. Once God has revealed Himself to us and we are able to bask in His presence and purity, we become 'hooked' and want more of Him. It becomes almost like a thirst. That is when the things of this earth no longer matter because we are able to focus our spiritual eyes on the Lord of glory. That is when our suffering diminishes to nothingness and we live and walk in the Spirit. Increasing the Kingdom of God becomes the highest priority in our lives before anything else. Eternity becomes very real in our hearts, knowing once we are in heaven, angels will be our friends. Once we get to that place in God where He is able reveal Himself to us, and have us respond to Him, we will be able to really walk in the Spirit just like John did (Revelation 1:10 & 4:2). Like John was, we too will be visited by angels, be taken up into heaven, experience heavenly things, learn secrets of eternity and have the joy of deep, peaceful fellowship with our Lord.

We are being purified for the Kingdom of God. The 'purifying' process is painful, but the end result will be a state of righteousness so holy, we will be able to stand before Jesus on Judgement Day, look Him in the eye and not be ashamed of ourselves. He will tell us to enter into His rest and then we will know that our earthly suffering was all worthwhile. It is not wasted. We must consider our suffering all joy, for the eternal outcome will be glorious. We do not have to fear, God will never forsake us. There is one scripture we can hold on to even in the deepest trial. 'For God Himself has said, "I will not in any way fail you, give you up nor leave you without My support. I will not, I will not, I will not leave you, nor forsake you, nor let you down. I will not relax My hold on you!" So we take courage and boldly say, "The Lord is my Helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"' (Hebrews 13:5 & 6).

Amen and God bless you.

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