

## Suffering as a Vocation

Suffering often seems to catch us by surprise. One day we are healthy, comfortable, and happy. The next we find ourselves ill or injured, struggling, and distraught. The pain that invades our lives may come from our own suffering or that of a loved one. But no matter the source, we didn't see it coming. All too often, if we let it, our perplexity prompts us in ways that we begin to suspect God of wrongdoing. God I didn't deserve that! They treated me badly! That was just wrong! I shouldn't be suffering, they should. They were the ones who did wrong. Why do I have to suffer for what they did wrong?" We get this sense that we have been treated unfairly or that God has allowed us to suffer unjustly. Think for a moment of Jesus, on the cross, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." I argue the point that God is not unjust and that no one has ever suffered at the hand of God unjustly. God is holy and righteous! He is love, for God is love. I am going to argue here that we shouldn't be surprised by our suffering; but instead, we should expect pain, suffering and sorrow in this life and that we are all actually called to a "vocation" of suffering. No matter the depth of our calling to suffer in this life we are all called to undergo the ultimate suffering in death. Our disease is terminal and it is called sin and living in this sinful world. God promises in His Word that difficult times will come upon us, but He also promises that He allows suffering for our good and His glory. James 1:12 "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him." Isaiah 26:3 – "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee." Romans 8:35-39 -- "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, or sword? As it is written Psalm 44:22 & also in Rom 8:36, "For Thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Continuing in verse 37-39 "Nay, **in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.** For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, **shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**" I John 4:4 -- "Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world." Romans 8:31 - - "What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against

us?" Who knows better what we can bear and handle than our Creator? James 1:2-4 says, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." "James 1:12-13 says, "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. When under trial, let no one say: "I am being tried by God." For with evil things God cannot be tried nor does He himself try anyone." So God does not bring the trials and problems on us, but He does allow them. He is not the source of our trials, tribulations and sicknesses that we face, but He does allow us to be tried, and as the scriptures cited above explain, He will help us, if we rely on Him. So what should we do when we get the "worst-case scenario?" Do you let the Holy Spirit guide you to a quick remembrance of great passages on God's sovereignty and His goodness in difficulty..? Thinking of Romans 8, Hebrews 11, and the many others. Do you also realize that you or your neighbor aren't being punished with cancer or a heart issues or that common cold or extreme financial heartache necessarily because you or they didn't do something just right for Jesus or because you haven't read the latest theologian's book or you missed your daily devotional or prayer time? We shouldn't point fingers. We all have failed and have all fallen short. Not saying you might have cancer or heart disease from smoking or some other bad habit, whether it either is of your own doing or another's. No matter how you look at it, God is at work. He is doing something. We can be sure that He loves us and in the end we will have increased joy and He will be glorified in and through our trials and sufferings.

Those of us who live here in the Western nations are blessed to a degree that previous generations would have never believed possible. For the most part we enjoy good health, comfortable lifestyles and security. We don't face imminent threats each day to our existence or even to our sense of well-being. These blessings, however, tend to lull us into a false sense of invulnerability. When we are spared from difficulties over time, we begin to expect that we will always escape hard things. It is at this point that when suffering, pain or death comes, it catches us by surprise. Rare is the saint that has a tranquil spirit in all the seasons of life. Suffering is one of the greatest challenges to any believer's faith. When pain, grief, persecution or other forms of suffering strike, we find

ourselves caught off guard, confused and full of questions. Suffering can strain our faith to the limits. II Cor. 4:8-10 -- "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." Paul made no attempt to mask his pain in some kind of fraudulent piety. Neither does he flee into a fantasy world that denies the reality of suffering. Paul freely admitted the pressure he experienced. We all know what it means to be hard pressed! We have troubles in our jobs, troubles in our marriages, troubles in our everyday relationships, troubles in finances our cars... Then add to that the death of a loved one or the difficulty of dealing with a long term or prolonged illness or even just a common cold. We all feel the pain of being hard pressed. AAn understanding of God's goodness and His sovereign power are necessary to cope with life in this fallen world. I want to teach people that life is extremely fragile and that we are to guard and protect that which God has given us, but we also need to recognize that there isn't a person in this sanctuary or in any other sanctuary, who can't have his or her whole world change with a single phone call. These are heavy truths, and I know they don't make for a feel-good sermon, but it's better to know these truths than to pretend it's not reality. I do know that we all have a tendency to suppose that we can carry far less than we really can. It seems that every time I pray God one more straw and I'm finished and I will be broken and it seems it is at that very moment God allows a fresh new load to be applied, as if He is saying, Don't tell me how much you can bear!" God knows our limits far better than we do! The promise of God isn't that He will give us no more than we want to bear; the promise of God is that He will never give us more than we can bear. Then in contrast to that very verse we read in Matthew 11:28-30 and we see, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." I can say of a surety that it does not always seem to me that the burden that God allows me to carry is light. In some ways it almost seems as if it is a false pretense, but HIS WORDS ARE TRUE! He does give rest to those who are heavy laden. The words easy and light are relative terms. Easy is relative to a standard of difficulty. Light is relative to a standard of heaviness. What is difficult to bear without Christ is made far more bearable with Christ. What would be a heavy burden to carry alone is made to be

a far lighter burden to carry with His help. It is His presence and His help that make it possible for us to stand up under the pressure. Christ is our shield that prevents the pressure that comes upon us from crushing us. There is no scandal in the mercy of God to the afflicted. Perplexity and confusion often accompany suffering. When we are stricken with illness or grief, we are often bewildered and confused. Our first question is, "Why?" We ask, how could God allow this to happen to me? There is an element of surprise that's connected to suffering. We learn early that pain is part of life, but it is a slow learning process. Usually starting with an earache or an upset stomach or burning our hand on the stove as a child. It's when we view our suffering as meaningless and without purpose that we get tempted to despair. The message that we have as Christians is that pain and suffering and even death, our death is not unto death, but unto life. We have a hope, The Hope! In Christ! We may be perplexed, but we should not despair! The pains of suffering in itself could be enough to drive us to despair, if we were not persuaded of the redemption that lies before us. Still even that redemption is not always enough to keep our eyes focused where they should be and we find ourselves approaching the rim of despair, just as Moses did in Numbers 11:15 – "If this is how you intend to treat me, just go ahead and kill me. Do me a favor and spare me this misery!" or with Job in Job 3:11-13 – "Why wasn't I born dead? Why didn't I die as I came from the womb? Why was I laid on my mother's lap? Why did she nurse me at her breasts? Had I died at birth, I would now be at peace. I would be asleep and at rest." And also even with Jeremiah in Jeremiah 20:14-15, 18 – "Yet I curse the day I was born! May no one celebrate the day of my birth. I curse the messenger who told my father, Good news—you have a son!"... "Why was I ever born? My entire life has been filled with trouble, sorrow, and shame." It is when suffering lingers that we are pushed to the depths. At all costs we need to make sure that the decisions we make are not made from a point of utter despair. At all times we must keep the goal of redemption in mind lest our hope be swallowed up by despair. And the only way to avoid despair is to place our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. David summed this up well in Psalm 27:13 – "I would have lost heart, unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." Just as Paul said, "we are perplexed but not in despair." Paul also wrote in II Corinthians 1:8-10 – "For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the

sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that He will deliver us again." Paul had entered into despair, but it was not utter despair. It was limited, because he knew the promise of Christ for victory over death.

We must keep in mind that no one has ever been called to a greater suffering than that of the suffering of God's only begotten son! When Jesus went to pray in Matthew 26:37-39 "Jesus took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." Going a little farther, Jesus fell with His face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Luke took it a bit farther and said in Luke 22:44 "And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground." We can say and know from this that Jesus was sorrowful and deeply distressed." Jesus was conscious of His mission. He knew He was under a death sentence. His suffering was terminal and God the Father afflicted Him with every terminal disease. To carry this burden was His vocation. His calling! To bear this pain and disease was His mission. The magnitude of this horror is beyond our understanding. But He understood it because it was His to bear. I want you to see the cross was not Satan's idea! The way of suffering was God's plan! The passion of Christ was not the result of human contingency. It was not the accidental contrivance of Caiphas, Herod or Pilate. The cup was prepared, delivered and administered by the Sovereign, Almighty God! Jesus qualified His prayer! He didn't name it and claim it. Jesus prayed "If it is Your will." Jesus knew His Father well enough to understand that it might not be His will to remove the cup, because the story doesn't end with; and the Father repented of what He had planned and removed the cup and Jesus lived happily ever after. Jesus said, as found in Luke 22:42 "Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours, be done." Our prayers should always be requests made in humility and submission to the Father's will. The prayer of faith is a prayer of trust. The very essence of faith is trust. We trust that God knows what is best. To have the spirit of trust includes a willingness to do what the Father wants us to do and Christ embodied that trust in the garden of Gethsemane. Isaiah 53 identifies Jesus as the suffering servant. Jesus endured His suffering in order to

redeem His people. But those He redeemed are not thereby delivered from all pain, suffering and misery. Indeed, as we shall see, we as His people are called to participate in His suffering. Because of Christ, our sufferings are not useless. They are part of the total plan of God, who has chosen to redeem the world through the pathway of suffering. Our text today is I Peter 4:12-19. I will start by saying that it's not possible to exhaust the text of I Peter 4:12-19 in one session. John Stewart Mill said that God can't be both all loving, and all good, and be omnipotent. This problem of suffering is what made Anthony Flue an atheist. British Atheist Bertrand Russell was a philosopher, logician, mathematician, historian, and social critic; he was inspired by John Stewart Mill.

The question of suffering shouldn't really be why there is so much suffering in the world, but it should rather be why there is so little suffering in the world. The problem of suffering is based on two things that we don't understand. We don't understand the character of God and we don't understand the seriousness of sin whether it is in our lives directly because of our own actions or in the lives of others and how it affects us and them or how it is based in the sinful world we live in and affects us all. Peter says in I Peter, "Let those who suffer according to God's will, entrust their souls to a faithful Creator, while doing good." What Peter is saying is that it is now our vocation to suffer for the glory of God because we are Not Here by accident, but According to the Will of God. This is a wonderful Biblical and Christian principal and conviction. Consider for a moment that, if I were to think that my pain and suffering happens because of blind chance or because of the collision of atoms that are running rampant in the universe outside of the will of God, then I am of all people the most to be pitied. God knows everything! He sees and knows all of what is happening. He doesn't miss anything. But if I know that whatever pain or suffering I bear comes to me by my loving heavenly Father then I can say just as Job did, that the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. And that is what enables us to say, "Blessed be the name of the Lord," in the depths of our deepest troubles and despair.

I Peter 4:12-19: 12 "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: 13But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. 14If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you:

on their part He is evil spoken of, but on your part He is glorified. 15But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. 16Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf. 17For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begins with us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? 18And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? 19Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to Him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator."

This is the Word of God and it speaks to us on this matter of profound importance in suffering and what it means to suffer, as a vocation, as a calling, as a Christian, and how we should handle it and view it as we live here in the valley of tears, we should take this scripture to heart. Throughout the study of I Peter we see many doctrinal and philosophical issues that get addressed. Just before this set of verses we just read from verses 12-19 we read in vs11 and see that Peter is discussing the glory of God and Peter speaks of, in what does God's glory consist? The answer to that question, as seen in verse 11 is God is glorified "in all things, through Jesus Christ." 11b "that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to Whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen." Notice here how Peter turns from the high note of God's glory to the dissonant note of the suffering of the people of God in this world. We look at the glory and the majesty of God's eternal, self-existent being, which so transcends everything creaturely, that it causes us to fall on our knees before Him, but in the midst of this great symphony that Peter giving us, there is this note of discord, a dissonant note, that gets sounded out. There is something here that doesn't seem to make sense. And Peter knows that. As he goes from verse 11 to verse 12 he now turns his attention from the glory of God to the suffering of God's people in the world. Notice how he begins this consideration... Verse 12 starts with, "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you as if some strange thing has happened to you." Notice twice here Peter speaks of something strange. Something that doesn't seem to fit! Something that doesn't make sense! An anomaly of and in the Christian life! A matter that brings concern to those who hear of it! And that, which is so seemingly strange, is the presence of pain and suffering in the Christian's life, all under the watchful eye of God. The British Atheist Bertrand Russell became an atheist, when he was a

teenager, when he was exposed to an essay by the British Philosopher John Stuart Mill. In that essay it Mill argued against the existence of God by saying, if everything must have a cause then God must have a cause and if God must have a cause then God is just like any other part of creation and that makes God not God, at least He isn't the God that we know of from the Biblical standpoint. That thought process represents a fundamental misrepresentation of the law of causality. The law of causality doesn't state that everything must have a cause, but rather that every effect must have a cause. The latter part of the statement is made true by its very definition. Every effect must have a cause. Not everything must have a cause. There was another man from England who was the son of a Methodist minister, an evangelical Methodist minister, a scholar, a pastor, a man who delivered messages at Oxford, and elsewhere. This brilliant pastor had an equally brilliant son, who became an atheist at the age of 15. And the irony is, that the reason he became an atheist was because of the very same philosopher John Stuart Mill. But it was another thesis of Mill that captured this young mans mind, it was Mill's statement that "God can't be both omnipotent and all loving." To say it another way, he took it to mean that God can not be both omnipotent and good. Because if He is omnipotent and yet allows the atrocities that befall human beings in this world, the vast dimension of pain and suffering that is our everyday experience, if God were omnipotent then He would have the power to stop all this and since He doesn't stop all this, that is proof positive that God is neither good, nor all-loving. On the other hand, if He is good and all-loving and doesn't want to see this savage brutality that afflicts the human race stop, then that must mean that He is incapable of stopping it and then therefore He is not omnipotent. Do you see what Mill was saying? Do you feel the weight of that argument? Well this 15 year old boy, the son of the evangelical minister felt the weight of it and came to the conclusion that there must be no God at least not certainly the God of the Bible.

Later on in the cause of his atheism, Anthony Flue told a story, which was a parable. It is one of the more famous parables in the English language, save, except for the parables of Jesus. He tells the story of two explorers who were wandering in the jungle and wilderness far removed from any civilization and as they were cutting through the brush they came upon a clearing with a beautiful, wondrous, perfect garden, in the middle of no-where. With not a weed anywhere to be found, looking perfectly tended. Perfect straight lines! Perfect rows! Row



after row after row! One explorer looked at the other and asked the question, WOW! I wonder where the gardener is! So they decided to wait for him. And they waited and waited and waited and no gardener showed. So one explorer said to the other we must have been mistaken. This must be one of those inexplicable freaks of nature. So let's move along. The other said no, maybe the gardener is just invisible, and we can't see him, as he is busy tending the garden and we just aren't able to see him. So the explorers decided to set a trap. They put wire fencing up and hung bells on the wires, so that if the gardener bumped the wires as he was tending the garden, the bells would ring and they would know that the gardener was there. So they set their trap and they waited and waited and waited... And the bells didn't ring! So one explorer looked at the other and said see, so much for the invisible gardener! He's not here! The other said well, I'm not done yet! Maybe this gardener is not only invisible, but maybe he is also immaterial, so that he doesn't have a body by which for him to bump the wires and ring the bells as he is tending the garden. So the philosopher with his parable said that what has happened with the concept of God is that **He has died the death of a thousand qualifications and he said in the final analysis; what is the difference between an invisible, immaterial God and no God at all? And of course the answer to that question screams! The garden! What about the garden? The difference is the garden. How do you account for the perfect design of a perfect garden without a designer?**

I'll come back to this parable in just a bit. But this whole question that he raised in this parable so many years ago has been on my mind. I think we all know who Ben Stein is. The dry eyes guy. He has a movie coming out in the spring. It is titled Expelled! It will be highly controversial. He addresses in this movie what is happening to professors and teachers in the colleges and high schools who have had the audacity to suggest that the universe may be here as a result of intelligent design, rather than as the result of a cosmic accident. As we all know, throughout all the history of western science, the work of philosophy and the philosophical foundations of science, have promoted free inquiry of any question of this type, with the virtue of having the courage to take you where ever the evidence may lead you, but then all of sudden here in America there is an inquisition going on against free inquiry through either philosophical or theological involvement. School boards are ruling in many places that any

teaching of intelligent design is out of bounds within the school system. And **That my friends is an unintelligent decision.** Because what is at stake isn't just Christianity, religion or theology but the act of scientific inquiry itself. And during this debate, one of the most remarkable things that has come out in the last few years, came out of Great Britain, where the author of this parable I gave you, Anthony Flew, one of the most well known Atheists of our time, has suddenly Changed His Mind. He has come to the conclusion that the evidence for God is compelling and that intelligent design isn't simply an optional theory but is a philosophical necessity. And it is interesting to note how that Flue's conversion has impacted the Atheist community. The blogosphere went crazy! And this poor man has been all but assassinated by philosophers and scientists that say that the only reason he has changed his mind is that he has entered into some state of dementia in his old age and he is losing his mind. So Flue took it upon himself to write a book explaining why he changed his mind. And if you read the book, you will see that you aren't reading the writings of some demented, crazy person. Ian Hutchinson, Professor and Head of the Dept. of Nuclear Science and Engineering, MIT said, "Anthony Flew's book will incense atheists who suppose (erroneously) that science proves there is no God." British philosopher Flew has long been something of an evangelist for atheism, debating theologians and pastors in front of enormous crowds. In 2004, the news reports announced that he had changed his mind and his book "There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind," tells us why.

I said I'd come back to Flue and the parable of the garden... You know what made him become an atheist in the first place was not the business of the garden in the wilderness; it was the problem of suffering. When he was 15 years old, he read John Stewart Mill and saw Mill's saying that God can't be both all-loving or all-good and be omnipotent, knowing all the suffering that we go through and deal with, knowing that God was supposed to be all-good and all-loving, yet so much suffering. Flue couldn't answer Mill's criticism of Christianity. Philosophers call the problem of pain, suffering and death the Achilles heel of the Christian faith. But Flue came at it from a different way. He said that, whenever you assert the existence of something you have to take into account whatever evidence works against it. For example, if you are going to say that the world is round, you have to first overcome all the evidence that appears and is given to the naked eye that it is flat. And the idea of a round world was a long time

supplanting the idea of a flat earth, because it was strange. It was so strange that it seemed that the easier explanation for this earth would be to continue to believe that it was flat. If we were to look at each of our high school physics books or science books we would see that many things are changed and many of the things would be downright laughable. Some of it would appear to come from out of the middle ages. Many things have been put aside. What happens in the scientific world is that there are paradigms, models and theories that attempt to describe all of reality. But so far no scientific theory of the world has ever been able to be free of contrary evidence. Uniformitarian Geology is a scientific truth. The changes in this earth have developed in a uniform, slow changing way, not as a result of some sudden catastrophic moment that changed everything. Not saying that there haven't been some catastrophic changes, there have been, but in general, things change slowly. However the uniformitarian geologists have this problem of the Mastodon's that were frozen in the icecaps with undigested tropical food in their bellies. That tropical food didn't get there slowly. Tropical fish don't live in the freezing polar waters! Every theory has counter evidence and if that counter evidence become too severe or too strong you have to change your theory. So back to what Flue said, he was listening to his dad in church that God is all-good, all-loving, omnipotent and all-powerful I saw strange things. What about the war camps? The Ukraine and Joseph Stalin, The Holocaust, The Camps, The Nazis, Hitler and the Jews, Sadam Hussein and the Arabs. Sadam killed more Arabs than any man in human history. Sometimes just for the fun of it. There is unspeakable suffering and pain in this world. If your eyes are open and you are seeing this, you have to raise the question, just as they did in the Bible, Why? Why? Why, do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer? It just doesn't make sense. Psalm 37:12-14 says the wicked "plot against the godly; they snarl at them in defiance. The wicked draw their swords and string their bows to kill the poor, the needy and the oppressed, to slaughter those who do right. But verse 13 says, "But the Lord just laughs, for He sees their day of judgment coming." There aren't too many people who in the midst of pain, suffering and death can look to the heavens and say as Job did in Job 1:21, naked came I from my mother's womb. Naked shall I return. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord! Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him! Now for someone to be there, rather than where Flue was when he was 15, they have to have a profound understanding of the character of God and a profound trust in His goodness. Now I'd like for us to see

how Jesus answered that question and how Peter answers the question why? Peter says in I Peter 4 why are you taken by surprise? Why do you think it so strange? Why was it that the Jews simply just couldn't believe that Jesus could be the Messiah? They were asking how could Jesus be the Son of God and have to suffer? What kind of a God would send His own Son to Golgotha? If you turn to Luke 13:1-5 you will see they came to Jesus and wanted to know what about those poor innocent people in Galilee that were giving their offerings and sacrifices when the soldiers of Pilate rushed in and slaughtered them, for no apparent cause, mixing their blood with the blood of the sacrifices? What about those 18 people that were walking down the street in Siloam minding their own business when the temple fell on them and crushed them? Where was God when that happened? If we look at Luke 13:5 we will see what Jesus said, Jesus answered them and said; well these are a couple of anomalies we don't have answer for. So maybe we need to adjust our understanding of the character of God? Or He could have said, I know the Bible says that He who keeps Israel neither slumbers or sleeps, but that is really poetic hyperbole and just think of how tedious and demanding it is for my Father to manage the affairs of this vast universe and mankind while keeping the stars and the planets in their courses and keep every atom in its place, but even my Father has to rest and on that day He was taking a nap when Pilate soldiers, unbeknownst to my Father killed those poor people. I'll take it up with Him to make sure that doesn't ever happen again. I know, I know I know I said that never does a sparrow land on the ground except my Father knows it and in fact every hair is known to Him and He counts the hairs on your head, but on that particular afternoon His attention was diverted for a second because he was busy counting the hairs on a particularly bushy hair fellow and His attention was diverted for a second and those poor 18 people were killed. NO! NO! NO. We all know that isn't what Jesus said! Nothing of the sort! So what did Jesus say..? He said unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. What He was saying to His disciples and through His disciples to us was this... It is something that most people don't take the time to consider. The question it seems to me isn't Why shouldn't God let that temple fall on those people's heads? These people had been in utter rebellion against their creator, from the day they were born. And when the God put His Son on the earth in front of Him they sought to destroy Him. The question it seems to me isn't why there is so much suffering in the world, but why is there so little? Why are we not all suffering in hell this very moment, in light of our blasphemous hostility to

our Creator? One of the reasons there is suffering, pain and death in this world isn't because God isn't good it is because He is a good God, but a good God will not allow evil to go unpunished. Jesus is saying you are asking the wrong question. Peter asks why we are looking at suffering and pain as if it were something strange. The word that he uses there in this verse is the same term we use for xenophobia. Fear of people who are strangers, people that don't fit into our mould. Well, beloved; he said, don't think it is strange concerning the fiery trial that comes to try you to mould you. Don't you understand that our trials are not without purpose? Don't you know that the God who has redeemed you counts your soul more valuable than gold and so as gold is refined in the fire, so are you refined? And though you suffer for a moment, the goal of God in your suffering is your redemption, not your destruction. I Peter 1:6-7 says, "So be truly glad. Rejoice! There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you have to endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world." Well... You may say, that's true for us, but what about those poor souls who are suffering in hell and those who will suffer and perish in hell. God knew well before they ever went to hell that that is where they would go. He even knew before the foundations of the world what they would choose. So what kind of a God would create a person already knowing that those would perish would create them anyway? What kind of God would do such a thing? A Holy one! That's who! You see the problem of pain, suffering and evil is based upon two things we don't know. We don't fully understand the character of God and we don't fully understand the seriousness of sin. And those are very weighty matters. Now I'm going to say something that is going to shock you. And because of the seriousness of the matter I want you to listen very carefully to what I am about to say, because if or when you decide to quote me I want you to get it right. Because it is going to shock you... Whoever said that God is all-loving anyway? John Stewart Mill said that if God is all-good, then He has to be all-loving. Why? Why does a good God have to love evil people? Tell me that! Why? Why does a good God have to love evil people? In fact, though there are some respects where He does love evil people, there are other respects where it says that He abhors them! On the one hand His benevolence goes out to all and on the other He says He abhors the wicked!

Why shouldn't He abhor them? How about us? How about myself? Why should He even choose to love me? I have no inherent claim on the love of God. I wouldn't be here apart from it, but the fact that He loves me is not because He owes it to me and not because my character demands it... It's only because of the mercy and grace that transcends my understanding that He could love me at all. Don't think it strange he says, instead rejoice! Rejoice to what extent? Rejoice to the point that you partake of Christ's sufferings. Rejoice that your sufferings come as a result of your participation and identification with the suffering and humiliation of Jesus. We suffer because He suffered and He asked us to join Him in that suffering. His suffering was redemptive, ours isn't, but in our suffering we bear witness to the glory of His suffering. Paul wrote in Colossians, I fill up that which was lacking in the sufferings of Christ. Not in the sense that there was any merit or sufficiency lacking in the sufferings of Christ and in Jesus' passion, but rather what Paul was getting at is that Christ has invited all who are in Him, in this world, to taste of His suffering and to the extent for which we are able to share in the sufferings of Jesus' should be an occasion, Peter says, not for consternation, but for exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you! We heard that in the Sermon on the Mount. For the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you! Peter is saying here that he doesn't see a conflict between the glory of God and the suffering that exists in this world. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. Then Peter starts to talk about where judgment begins in the house of the Lord, but I want to jump to the last verse of this section. To the conclusion, in verse 19, it says, "Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator." Did you hear that? Let's hear that again, "Let those who suffer according to" According to what? According to the will of God! No servant is greater than His master.

Have you ever had to go to a hospital to minister to people who were terminally ill? Such as someone who is ill with stage four cancer or is in a state of congestive heart failure. Walking into their room can be like walking into a concentration camp and you try to minister and give hope. Trying to give hope to someone who is in grave and dire pain, in their deepest pit of suffering. Are we surprised by suffering or are we aware that it is a part of everyday life? People are surprised when they get a medical report that their disease is

incurable! Immediately a person's focus changes as they realize that they are now called to suffer. It doesn't matter if they were a banker, a physician, a school teacher, a truck driver or a farmer. You then realize that your vocation now is to suffer for the glory of God. God does not always will healing on this side of eternity, if He did, this world would be a pretty full planet! We are to pray and to ask for the forgiveness of our and other's sins. We are supposed to do our part to do our best to do our duty to do the will of God, but what about when that will, His will, causes us to suffer? Your vocation at that point becomes to suffer for the glory of God. You are not here by accident! You are here by and according to the divine will of God. People bristle at that! People don't want to hear that God calls us to suffer! People don't want to believe that God has anything to do with our suffering, but I can assure you of this; that if God doesn't have anything to do with our suffering, we are assuredly without hope. If I think that my suffering is a result of blind chance, a collision of atoms, a random happening, outside of the will of God, a situation that God has or had no control over I am of all people the most to be pitied. I may as well sit and sing "woe is me" until the day I die, but if I know that whatever pain I bear, whatever suffering I endure, and know that my final end, whatever and whenever it may be comes to me, when it comes, it comes to me by the will of my heavenly Father and if I really know that and believe in the Sovereignty of God **And I Do** then I ought to be able to say with Job, "Naked came I from my mother's womb. Naked shall I return. The Lord gives. The Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord! And I know that my redeemer lives! And I will see Him standing at the last day." Now that is at the heart, soul and very essence of Christianity! Your Christian faith means nothing until you come to this place. Until you go to the valley of the shadow of death. "Wherefore let those who suffer according to the will of God, commit their souls to Him, while doing good, as unto a faithful Creator." Did you hear that? If God calls you to suffer, you have to commit your soul to Him. Not as a capricious, vengeful tyrannical deity, but as a faithful Creator. The hardest time to believe that God is faithful is when His hand is heavy on your back. And what we are told is that though we suffer, though it may be excruciating, it is only for a moment and it isn't worthy to be compared with what our faithful Creator has prepared for us for eternity. There is no scientific paradigm that reaches the point of omniscience. No scientific paradigm can tell us what will be tomorrow and we can't judge the final goodness and power of God not until we see the new heaven and the new earth,

where pain is exiled forever, suffering is vanquished forever and death is forever banished. We can trust God because He is worthy of our trust. He is faithful! And trusting Him is the only answer that I know of to the reality of suffering in this world. We cannot protest that God is unjust in allowing us to suffer! If someone wrongfully causes me to suffer, I have every right to plead with God for vindication, even as Job did. Yet at the same time, I must not complain to God that He is at fault in allowing suffering to befall me. In terms of my relationship with other people, I may be innocent, but in terms of my relationship to God, I am Never an Innocent Victim! It is one thing for me to ask God for justice in my dealings with man, but it is another to demand justice in my relationship with God. The worst thing that could possibly befall me or any of us or anyone that has ever lived is for any of us to receive pure justice from God. If I hope in anything or anyone less than the One who has power over suffering and ultimately death, I am doomed to final disappointment. Suffering will drive me to hopelessness. What character I have will disintegrate. It is the hope of Christ that makes it possible for us to persevere in times of tribulation and distress. We have an anchor for our souls that rests in the One who has gone before us and conquered. God ordains everything according to His purposes. In other words God is Sovereign. God can work through suffering to accomplish His plan. Suffering is part of the total plan of God. In Ecclesiastes 7 it affirms that the day of a person's death is better than the day of his birth. That is true from the standpoint of a pessimist, who can't wait to get it over with, assuming that the pessimist were passing on into the kingdom of heaven and not into eternal judgment. And this same sentiment is true for the optimist, for the Christian. The day of one's birth is a good day, but the day of death is the greatest day that a Christian can ever experience in this world because it is on that day they get to go home. The day they enter the Father's house! The day of ultimate triumph and yet it is a day that we fear and avoid and try our best to postpone as long as we possibly can and I can't help but wonder if it is because sometimes we don't really believe that the day of our death is better than the day of our birth as Ecclesiastes says. Ecclesiastes 7:13-15 -- "Consider the work of God: who can make straight what He has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him. In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing.



Prayer: We thank you Father that you know when we are suffering and are in pain. You know our frames and that they are of the dust and You have decreed that they will return to dust and You have also decreed that they will not stay in the dust and by the power of resurrection; You have left us as a people with hope, whose Hope is the anchor of our souls. We thank You Father for the Truth that You have given us, the Truth that is the Anchor for our souls. It is the Anchor in the midst of all of our triumphs and successes as well as in our pain and sufferings through trials and tribulations of great anguish and pain. Please Lord help us to come to a deeper understanding of these words You have given us and we ask it in Jesus name. Amen.

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