

DISCIPLESHIP PRINCIPLE #6

James 1:2-4

RESPONDING TO SUFFERING AND ADVERSITY

The Christian life is not hard...it is IMPOSSIBLE in our own strength. To live as God commands us to live, after our salvation, in the midst of the adversity and sufferings that come with serving Christ here in this fallen world requires a spiritual maturity and power that is often lacking.

*“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but **to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing**; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but **if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God.**” — 1 Pet. 4:12-16*

“Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus...we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that

- 1) you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that*
- 2) you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord,*
- 3) to please Him in all respects,*
- 4) bearing fruit in every good work and*
- 5) increasing in the knowledge of God;*
- 6) you be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience;*
- 7) joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.” — Col. 1:3-12*

The Word of our God tells us that the hard things we face in life as we serve Him can only be understood if they are seen:

1. In light of where we are in the long war against our God Whom we serve.

*"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. **In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.**" — John 16:33*

We are faced with adversity against us as we seek to serve Christ from **three great enemies** of His and ours: the world, the flesh, and the Devil. This fallen world is under the judgment of our God because it has put Him out and does not subject itself to Him and His will. Our Adversary the Devil seeks to defeat and destroy our efforts to glorify God and get us to join Him in opposing the will of God. And finally, we have a great battle within ourselves between our new nature and our old flesh.

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.”
— Gal. 5:16-17

2. In light of what will happen to us when our life in this war is over.

*“Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and cast insults at you, and spurn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. Be glad in that day, and leap for joy, **for behold, your reward is great in heaven;** for in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets.”*
— Luke 6:22-23

Unless we embrace the PROMISES that God has given us in His Word regarding what He will ultimately do, and how He will take the grievous things that He allows to come into our lives and turn them by His power into glory for Himself and us, we cannot respond to adversity and suffering with the thankfulness and joy that He wants from us.

“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”
— James 1:2-4

3. In light of what God has said He will do about these hurtful things.

*“And we know that **God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.** ...What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ...But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.”*
— Rom. 8:28-37

As one hymn writer has expressed it:

Yes, its good for me to praise my Lord and Savior
And to thank Him for the trials that come my way...
For He takes these grievous things,
And He turns them by His power,
Into glory for Himself and those He loves!

4. In light of what God intends to accomplish in us and then through us by allowing these trials and tests.

Here is a story you can probably relate to:

When I was a boy, my parents wanted me to grow up to be a mature man., with knowledge and skills to be useful in *life*. So... *they PURPOSELY put some adversity and trials in my life.*

If they caught me playing in the street, I got a lecture and a switching – to correct my natural thinking and behavior. Those cruel parents – taking away all the wonderful things in life. But we know that “a child who gets his own foolish way, brings grief to his mother – because he keeps on this track into adulthood.

The same is true of our heavenly Father who disciplines us for our good. All discipline for the moment is sorrowful, but afterwards it yields the fruit of righteousness.

When I got to be 6 my parents put me in a 12 year training program called a school. Talk about tests and trials. You had to sit in a chair most of the time – the only real fun was a 20 minute recess when you could really do what you wanted. But there were tests regularly that you had to pass – and then guess what – *if you passed, you got promoted to a HARDER class the next year.*

They said that all that trouble and testing had the goal of my graduating from something called a high school, with the goal of me being qualified, able to be useful in life somehow.

Just after that high school graduation I was hired on at a wood products *plant near home*. The supervisor said on the first day. “*Kid, we are going to test you for a couple of days. If you can do this work safely, if you have the character to work hard, if you have enough skills for this, then, we will be able to use you. If not, you will need some more training and maturing and we won't be able to use you.*”

Just like this maturing and training to be useful in the world, there is work for us to do for our Savior that He has prepared for us in advance. But we must learn how to do it, and have the character to pursue it with diligence and perseverance. His schools and training are often full of hard and hurtful things.

And in addition to all this our Lord expects us to go out and teach others how to face and persevere in the adversity they will face – so we need to be good students to become good teachers.”

So...

What Happens When We Do Not Understand God's Purposes For Allowing Suffering And Adversity?

If we do not understand God's purposes for suffering, affliction, troubles in life, weaknesses, hurts, and wrongs, they often become the means of our greatest discouragements. They can lead us to lose heart and give up our efforts to live for God. The things we face in life become our greatest sources of discouragement if we fail to see them in the context of God's Providential Hand.

- **We grow weary and lose heart** and give up running the race of life for God.

*"Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not **grow weary and lose heart.**"* — Heb 12:1-3

Have you run hard – but have grown weary in the battle?

- We easily become **bitter** toward God and our offenders and it controls our thoughts and emotions

"See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled."— Heb 12:15

Are there people who have hurt you that you have not forgiven and are bitter toward? _____ See to it.

- **We focus on removing these hard things** rather than thanking God for them and allowing Him to use them to reveal our true weaknesses and transform us into His image.

"And He said to me...My strength is made perfect is your weakness." — 2 Cor. 12:9

How could this be illustrated in your life? _____

- **We try to live for God by our own efforts** in facing these hard things in life rather than relying on the power of the indwelling Spirit.

"...that He would grant you... to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man." — Eph 3:16

Is your life an illustration of walking in the power of God? _____

However, if we do understand God's purposes in allowing them, they can be our greatest motivation and means for spiritual growth and fruitfulness. The following lines, written in reflection on a difficult life filled with adversity and suffering express this well:

*I asked God for strength, that I may achieve;
I was made weak, that I might humbly learn of His power.
I asked for health, that I might do greater things;
I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.
I asked for riches, that I might be happy;
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.
I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men;
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for things, that I might enjoy life;
I was given life, that I might enjoy things.
In spite of myself, my prayers were answered.
I among all men am most richly blessed.*

Perhaps the most fruitful of all the apostles of the early church was Paul. Over a period of about 30 years he labored and served as the Lord led him. Please read the following description of the things that he said the Lord allowed and used in his life to fulfill His plans for him.

“Beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. (40 was considered a death sentence) Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches.”
— 2 Cor. 11:23-28

Why God Allows Suffering In The Life Of A Believer

What are the primary reasons God allows His people us to suffer in life, especially as they purpose to serve Him and live for Him?

1. **To discipline us in our immaturity** both to prevent sin and cause us to turn from it.

“But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world.”
— 1 Cor. 11:32

*“Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, **but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness.** All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.”* — Heb. 12:9-11

2. To have us learn to rely on His power, not ours, to live life.

*“...so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; **strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience.**”* — Col. 1:10-11

3. To have us grow in our faith and our hope and thus face life with these.

“For indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us.” — 2 Cor. 1:9-10

4. To have us gain spiritual experience that allows us to be an example to others, and equip them in the faith.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.” — 2 Cor 1:3-7

UNIT STUDY SESSION #1

In preparation for the group study on responding to the trials of life while serving our Lord here “in the midst”, read and study the scriptures and summary above and complete the following self - evaluation.

1. How would you rate your own responses to the trials God has allowed to come into your life? ___Ok___ Poor___ Good___ Lousy___ Excellent___ Better___

2. What do you think God would have you do at this point?

With past hurts that you still struggle with. _____

With present trials and difficult relationships. _____

3. What commitments are you willing to make?

I accept as true these primary reasons that God has allowed suffering and adversity in my life. _____

I purpose to thank the Lord on a daily basis for these grievous things, knowing that He will use them for His glory and mine. _____

I commit to live by the attitudes and responses God asks and requires of His people as I face the tests and trials that the Lord has said I will face if I am serious about serving Him. _____

I will use my life experiences to teach and comfort others who face similar things. _____

Discussion Questions For Session #1

- How can we help a person who is “in the midst”? How can we give them God’s perspective and comfort them wisely and effectively? Does it vary?
- How will our various spiritual gifts and motivations tend to lead us in helping others differently? Such as comforting vs. challenging, helping vs. exhorting.
- How long and how much do I invest myself in a person? When do I keep giving and helping them and when is it time to “move on”?
- If I am facing suffering and there is nothing I can do to fix it, how can I go forward with joy, thankfulness, and perseverance? Let alone help others?

UNIT STUDY SESSION #2

Preparation For Session #2: Personal Application Project

In preparation for the second study on this principle please consider doing the following:

1. Memorize Eph. 2:10, John 15:16, and Rom. 8:28. These verses give us God's perspective that we must accept and impose upon our difficult circumstances if we are to succeed in responding to what God allows in life in a manner that pleases Him.
(Col. 1:9-12)
2. Review list your past trials and greatest hurts in light of Rom. 8:28 and see what God has done to date. What has happened for good that would not have happened had you not experienced them? Be prepared to share and encourage others if you can.
3. Hope is required to live as a mature disciple of Christ and be able to help others. Study what the New Testament says about hope and be prepared to share what you learn as it relates to facing life "till He comes".

Discussion Questions

1. How many of you were able to memorize one or more of our memory verses? Have you been using them?
2. If you have been considering what God has done to use the difficult things that He has allowed in your life, could you encourage us by sharing about them?
3. Did any of you do a study on what the NT says about hope and would like to share what you learned?
4. What would you say to a Christian that is discouraged because they have believed or been taught the "prosperity gospel".
5. What commitments going forward have you made in this area of serving Christ while facing what He promised? How would it compare with this: "Down any road, at any cost, all for the love of my Savior".

Prayer Together