

STUDY UNIT 3

Eph. 2:4-10 / 1 Cor. 15:1-4 / John 3:3, 14-18

THE BLESSINGS OF BEING BUFFETED

I wonder if, when some of Paul's friends were able to visit him in that last Roman prison, treating some of his wounds, encouraging him in his suffering, and they offered to pray for him and ask God to deliver him from all that he was suffering, that he would have said, "***Oh please NO!! Don't ask for that! All of this is good. I am thankful to God for it. I count it all joy to be here in this cell, chained to these guards, expecting my death. Please don't ask God to heal my wounds and get me out of here! Please no, don't do that!***"

How could we even think this is a possibility? Well, because of 1) what Paul himself said about why we suffer as Christians, and 2) because of what he said about his own suffering. One of his **first letters** that we have in the New Testament was written 14 years after he was afflicted with some physical problem, which, it seems, God never removed. Notice his attitude toward it after 14 years.

"...Fourteen years ago...to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

*And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for (My) power is perfected in (your) weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore **I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.**"*
2 Cor. 12:2-10

We also have his **last letter** which was written to Timothy in his last imprisonment, just prior to his execution, exhorting Timothy to follow his example as he served Christ:

*"Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, or of me His prisoner; but **join with me in suffering for the gospel** according to the power of God, who has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His power....*

For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day."
2 Tim. 1:8-12

WHY IS SUFFERING A BLESSING FOR A DISCIPLE OF CHRIST?

1. Because Christ said it is

"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me." Matt. 5:10-12

"Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple." Luke 14:27

2. Because those who respond to it well, in a way that pleases God, will receive a reward

*"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

3. Because without trials and suffering we do not go on to maturity in Christ which requires that we learn to deny our own self-interests and even our life—for others

"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

"Applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness; and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love.

For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins."

2 Pet. 1:5-9

4. Because without experiencing “offenses and hurts” and responding to them correctly, we cannot help others through their hard things in life.

*“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

5. Because without learning to suffer for others as Christ did, in self-denial, even for our enemies, we are not the light that God wants us to be in this dark, selfish world.

"Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore be shrewd as serpents, and innocent as doves. But beware of men; for they will deliver you up to the courts, and scourge you in their synagogues; and you shall even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles.

But when they deliver you up, do not become anxious about how or what you will speak; for it shall be given you in that hour what you are to speak. For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you. And brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents, and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all on account of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved....

What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell....

Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven. Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword....And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.”
Matt. 10:16-38

“Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.

*And not only this, **but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because **the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.*****
Rom. 5:1-5

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under the peck-measure, but on the lampstand; and it gives light to all who are in the house.

"Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." Matt. 5:14-16

IS ALL SUFFERING THEN GOOD?

No. God is clear about this. We are to avoid suffering for doing what He considers wrong, while offering ourselves to Him to suffer for doing what He considers right.

"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....

....Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right." 1 Pet. 4:15-19

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES IF OUR RESPONSES TO SUFFERING ARE POOR?

1. The danger of becoming a "spiritual coward."

When Timothy began to face opposition and its associated suffering while serving Christ, it appears that Paul was concerned that **he was in danger of becoming a "spiritual coward."** He begins his letter with the following, and the exhortation to accept suffering rather than avoid it continued through the letter.

"For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline. Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, or of me His prisoner; but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God." 2 Tim. 1:7-8

2. Bitterness toward God and others is common.

"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

Giving someone who has hurt or wronged us what they deserve is the natural way of life for men. Seeking to see that this happens is what we naturally want and seek. But giving us the OPPOSITE of what we deserve is what God through Christ has given us. Now He wants us to do the same.

*"I say to you who hear, **love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.** Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either.*

Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back. And just as you want people to treat you, treat them in the same way.

*And **if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?** For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, in order to receive back the same amount.*

But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men."
Luke 6:27-35

Suffering at the hands of another person(s), is an OPPORTUNITY to respond this way. When we reject this opportunity, or are unable to use it because we are not availing ourselves of God's grace to do so, we resent the offense(s) and anger and bitterness dominates our soul.

HOW DOES SUFFERING AS A CHRISTIAN RELATE TO BEING REWARDED BY GOD ?

*"**Blessed are you** when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, **for your reward in heaven is great.**"*
Matt. 5:11-12

*"But Jesus called them to Himself, and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but **whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant,** and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."*
Matt. 20:25-28

*"But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but **the greatest of these is love.**"*
1 Cor. 13:13

UNIT 3 STUDY SESSION #1:

Evaluating My Responses To Suffering

In preparation for the group study read the summary above and then complete the following self-evaluation.

1. I am willing to suffer in the service of my Lord. ____ Yes, willingly ____ It depends
2. Contentment in the Lord, where I am and in what I face, describes me:
____ Well ____ Somewhat ____ No
3. I am fighting the good fight, fulfilling my ministry, finishing my course as it gets harder and harder: ____ Better and Better ____ OK ____ Poorly
4. I have been wounded. It has made me ____ Stronger ____ Weaker ____ I Quit
5. Joy, when I encounter various trials, and thankfulness as I endure them, describes me:
____ Well ____ Somewhat ____ Not at all

Discussion Questions For Study Session #1

1. This study emphasized the idea that suffering in life, as a Christian, can be a blessing to us. It contends that maturity for a Christian requires suffering. What are your thoughts and questions about this?
2. If you have faced hard things since becoming a Christian, how have they been used of God in your life and others? What have you learned? What have you seen and learned from others?
3. God never gave Job an answer as to why all the things he suffered occurred. What is there to learn from this?
4. How do I understand the verses that promise me prosperity if I do what pleases God, and the contrasting declarations of Scripture in this study that I will suffer tribulation if I serve Christ? (e.g. Prov. 21:21 and 22:4 vs. 1 Thess. 1:6 and 2:14)
5. 1 Cor. 10:13 states that God will not allow us to be tested beyond what we are able. How does this work? Does this mean that every Christian will always pass all of his tests? Does it mean that our tests will lessen or stop at some point?

Prayer Together

UNIT 3 STUDY SESSION #2:

In preparation for Session #2 consider pursuing one of the following projects and be prepared to share about it.

Preparation For Session #2: Application Project

1. Think through your life and list the major offenses and wrongs others have committed against you, physical and relational things you have suffered, and other bad things that have occurred. Then ask God to show you which of the following He allowed these for:
 - 1) Your own growth in wisdom and character
 - 2) Your need to stop living in your own strength for yourself and for others by His grace
 - 3) Your experience in what others face, so you can “comfort” them.
2. Study 1 Peter this week and summarize Peter’s main points regarding suffering.
3. Study the book of Jonah this week and identify how NOT to respond to suffering. Remember the context. Jonah was being sent to the Ninevites, who had treated Jonah’s people like Hamas treated some on Oct. 6. Or worse.
4. Study 2 Timothy this week and identify what Paul said were the good results of enduring the hard things of being a leader for Christ.
5. Study Psalm 44 this week and note David’s personal responses to suffering as he served God. Identify the principles and apply them as you can.

Discussion Questions

If you have been able to pursue one of the application projects can you share with us about it?

Prayer Together