

Suffering and the Sovereignty of God

I will second what Pastor Brodie said in his class on trusting God a couple of weeks ago: “I am not some kind of an expert on suffering. There are many here in this room who have been through much more than I have.”

When I was originally asked to lead this workshop February of 2020, I was in the midst of severe suffering. In fact, my husband, Doug would pass away just a month later.

Many great books have been written on suffering and I have read a number of them over the past few years. There's not enough time in this workshop to talk about every facet of suffering. I'm not going to give you an outline of any one book. I am going to talk about what God has taught me over the last 8-10 years (and continues to teach me) as I have walked through my own suffering.

My hope and prayer is that each of you will walk away from here feeling encouraged and having a bigger view of God.

I. My story

It's not a question of “if” you will suffer, but “when” you will suffer in your lifetime.

Elisabeth Elliot described suffering as “Having something you don't want and wanting something you don't have.” That about covers the gamut from silly little things to serious situations and circumstances.

Some of you are going through very difficult trials right now and trying to make sense of it all.

Many or most of you know my story and what I went through after moving here to Lynchburg 5 ½ years ago. When I said “I do” about 32 years ago, I could have never imagined how difficult the last 5 years of our marriage would be. I said “For better or for worse” not realizing all those years ago how heart-wrenching the last 5 years of my marriage would be. A year-and-a-half after moving to Lynchburg, we officially entered the horrible world of Fronto Temporal Dementia. Over the course of the next 2 ½

years, I would watch my strong, gifted husband dwindle to look like a POW after losing the ability to swallow the last 6 months of his life. You can't get your mind around it sometimes.

Why did God permit my precious husband to become diagnosed with dementia at the young age of 57 ½?

II. Truths I've Learned through suffering

God taught me so much during those years and he continues to teach me. CS Lewis once said, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain; it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world." God has all kinds of ways of getting our attention.

Elizabeth Elliot once said "The deepest things I have learned in my own life have come from the deepest suffering. And out of the deepest waters and the hottest fires have come the deepest things that I know about God."

I love this poem, in the booklet "Behind a Frowning Providence"

"I walked a mile with pleasure, she chattered all the way,

But left me none the wiser for all she had to say.

I walked a mile with sorrow and ne'er a word said she,

But oh the things I learned from her, when sorrow walked with me."

Here is a list of truths that have become so real to me over the last few years.

1. We can trust God in his sovereignty, goodness, wisdom and love.

Psalm 115:3 – "Our God is in heaven; He does whatever pleases Him.

If there is any one thing in my life out of God's control, then I can't trust him.

Jerry Bridges said "God in His love always wills what is best for us. In His wisdom He always knows what is best, and in his sovereignty He has the power to bring it about."

"I may not understand God's Hand but I can trust His heart."

Joni Eareckson Tada

Psalm 119:68 says, "You are good and what you do is good."

Do I really believe Romans 8:28 which says “and We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those called according to his purpose.” We must choose to trust Him – even when life doesn’t make sense.

Vaneetha Risner wrote, “When my plans crumble and God takes me away from my dreams, I must trust in God’s infinite wisdom. When my cup of suffering seems too much to bear, I need to rest in his immeasurable love. When my life spins out of control, I need to remember God’s absolute sovereignty.”

God’s love for us is deeper than we could ever imagine.

1 John 4:16 “We know and rely on the love the Lord has for us.” (to Believe the love)

These bedrock truths got me through those difficult years and continue to get me through.

Psalm 9:9-10 – “The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you.”

2. We must view our suffering in light of His suffering. Does God suffer? Has he ever suffered? The answer is “Yes”! God suffered when He became flesh and lived among us in this sinful, broken world.

Hebrews 2:10 says “In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.”

Hebrews 5:7-9 says,”

“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, He offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” At the end of that chapter, it states “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

Jesus was called the “Man of Sorrows acquainted with grief.” In Isaiah 53:3. In vs 10, it states

“Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer.”

Christ willingly entered our pain. And He is so aware of where you are right now.

3. My sufferings are achieving something for me. “Nothing is wasted in the life of a Christian”. -John Piper

Our sufferings are never for naught.

2 Cor. 4:16-18

“Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

“When Paul is hurting, he fixes his eyes not on how heavy the hurt is, but on how heavy the glory will be because of the hurt.” Piper

About 6 months after Doug’s diagnosis, I was walking around the house with a certain look on my face. Brittany looked at me and said “Mom, what are you thinking?” I said, “I was thinking if only your dad didn’t have dementia.” She said, “Mom, if dad didn’t have dementia, we wouldn’t be in Lynchburg right now, and look at how God has blessed us.” A few months later, we were talking through texts and I told her I wasn’t doing very well emotionally. She said to me, “Mom, hope is borne of suffering.”

I, soon thereafter, came across Romans 5:3 which says “We rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”

I love this quote from Elizabeth Elliott “God never does anything “to” us that isn’t “for” us.

4. God is absolutely trustworthy and faithful even when we are faithless. Lam 3:22-23. “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

I'm a testimony of God's faithfulness. I was ready to walk out the door before we had a diagnosis and Doug's behavior became more and more ungodly and abusive. He kept me in a difficult marriage. He never stops working.

I was so full of bitterness and even hatred towards my husband and God literally delivered me from all of it overnight. **The story is too long to include here, but let me know if you want to hear it!**

5. **God is not afraid of my questions.** We've all questioned God at some point in our lives. A good word for that is "Lament". The psalms are full of laments. To Lament is to pour your heart out to God. Mark Vroegop in his book entitled "Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy" said "Lament is the heart's honest cry of a hurting heart wrestling with the paradox of pain and the promise of God's goodness." You see lament all the way through the psalms and other books as well. I came to the conclusion that it's ok to ask God questions as long as we don't have our fist raised while we are doing it.

Jesus, in his humanity, said "My God, my God why have you forsaken me? Which was straight from Ps 22:1.

Ps 88:14. O Lord, why do you cast my soul away?

Then there are a number of verses asking the question "How long?"

Ps 13:1-2 "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever" How long will you hide your face from me? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?"

I love the entire chapter of Psalm 62, but for times sake will just read verse 8:

"Trust in him at all times, O people, pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge." And that is what I did again and again.

Vaneetha Risner put it this way:

"Part of really living is being willing to face sadness. Not wallowing in my pain and refusing to be comforted, but honestly and openly telling God where I am and asking Him to show me truth. Letting him, the God of all

comfort, comfort me. Letting him, the God of hope, fill me with hope. And letting him, the man of sorrows acquainted with grief, bear my sorrows for me.”

God is not afraid of our questions. And I had a lot of questions.

6. Christ and Christ alone must be our source of hope and joy. Our joy can't be in our circumstances or the hope that things are going to get better, or in anything else. Only through Christ can you be “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” as the Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Cor 6:10.

I remember praying to God in desperation “Be my all”. He loves to answer those prayers.

As you are walking through your trials, who is your source?

7. Our response matters. Your faith matters to God. His glory is at stake in our lives. Vaneetha Risner also wrote “I can show the surpassing worth of Christ when I suffer well – when I joyfully accept circumstances that are less than perfect, when I give up my need to control. Willingly relinquishing my need to have things exactly as I want is an act of worship.”

I must choose to trust God – no matter how bleak things look. Daily choices. I must choose to see my cup as half full rather than half empty,

This Spurgeon quote has comforted me many times over the years “Providence is wonderfully intricate. Ah! You want always to see through Providence, do you not? You never will, I assure you. You have not eyes good enough. You want to see what good that affliction was to you; you must believe it. You want to see how it can bring good to the soul; you may be enabled in a little time, but you cannot see it now; you must believe it. Honor God by trusting Him.” C.H. Spurgeon

This can only be done through God's grace. We must have the conviction that it is God's glory that matters most. He is the one we want to please. Heb. 11: 6 states, “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because

anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that he is a rewarder of those who earnestly seek Him.”

Choosing to cultivate gratitude – as I said – daily choices. There’s always something to be grateful for!!

8. God uses broken things. He can take our brokenness and turn it into something beautiful. Sometimes, all we have to offer God is our brokenness. Elisabeth Elliot quoted an anonymous writer in her book “suffering is never for nothing” “If my life is broken when given to Jesus, it may be because pieces will feed a multitude when a loaf would only satisfy a little boy.” And that’s ok. It is a sweet smelling sacrifice. How can he use your brokenness for his glory?

9. Ultimately, God is using our suffering to make us more like Christ. I love the illustration of a sculptor in “Behind a Frowning Providence.” If you were to ask a sculptor “What are you doing?” He might say “I’m chipping away at everything that doesn’t look like a horse.” And in our pain we ask God, “What are you doing?” He says “I’m just chipping away everything that doesn’t look like my son.”

That thing you want to rid yourself of may be the very thing God wants to use to make you more like Jesus. (Elisabeth E. paraphrase)

Two Questions we need to ask ourselves when facing a difficult trial:

1. What is God trying to work in me? (He’s after something in my life.)
2. How can I glorify Him in it? (What does faith look like in my life?)

Folks here at TBC just heard a message on Job a few weeks ago. I’m going to end with this quote by RC Sproul about the sufferings of Job. “What is noteworthy in this drama is that God never directly answers Job’s questions. He doesn’t say “Job, the reason you have suffered is for this or

that.” Rather, what God does in the mystery of the iniquity of such profound suffering is that He answers Job with Himself. This is the wisdom that answers the question of suffering. Not the answer to why I have to suffer in a particular way, in a particular time, and in a particular circumstance, but wherein does my hope rest in the midst of suffering.”

Now is the Time to Prepare

It’s not a question of “if” you will suffer, but “when”. Isaiah 43:2-2 says “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned.” It doesn’t say “if” you do these things. Suffering is part of living in a fallen world. Your soul must be anchored in the truths of God’s word.

The time to prepare for suffering is not when you are in the midst of it. God wants to build up our faith through His word, so we can trust him when those difficult times come. “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.” Romans 10:17

We must saturate ourselves in the truths of God’s Word. Phil 2:12b-13 “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” We work because God is working!

I Pet 5:10-11 is the perfect passage to leave you with today:

“And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To Him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.”

Recommended Resources:

- **Suffering is Never for Nothing** - Elisabeth Elliot
- **Be Still my Soul** - Elisabeth Elliot
- **The Scars that Have Shaped Me** - Vaneetha Risner
- **When God Weeps** - Joni Eareckson Tada and Steven Estes
- **Suffering** - Paul David Tripp
- **Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy** - Mark Vroegop
- **Behind a Frowning Providence** - John Murray
- **Trusting God** Even When Life Hurts - Jerry Bridges