



Sample Chapter...Triumph in Trial

“It has been well said that ‘earthly cares are a heavenly discipline’. But they are even something better than discipline -- they are God’s chariots, sent to take the soul to its high places of triumph. They do not look like chariots. They look instead like enemies, sufferings, trials, defeats, misunderstandings, disappointments, un-kindness . . . But could we see them as they really are, we should recognize them as Chariots of triumph in which we may ride to those very heights of victory for which our souls have been longing and praying . . . There can be no trials in which God’s will has not a place somewhere; and the soul has only to mount into His will as in a chariot, and it will find itself ‘riding upon the heavens’ with God in a way it had never dreamed could be.” Hannah W. Smith^{1[1]}

The most painful mystery of life is suffering. Why does God allow this to happen? The Bible tells us that a primary purpose of suffering is to make us better people. Our response to this may be to wish that God would find a better way to improve us. It is natural to wish that life would not be so difficult and maturing would not be so painful. Why is it necessary for God to change us? Why didn't He just create us perfectly, or did He?

The book of Genesis tells us that, before Adam and Eve rebelled against God, they lived in harmony with Him. They probably enjoyed perfect health as well as the absence of evil. When they chose to go their own way, God allowed them the consequences of their decision. They forfeited their fellowship with God and fell under the natural laws of the universe and under the power of evil. God created humanity to rule over the universe^{2[2]} but, beginning with Adam and Eve, we became subject to its order, suffering from the force and accidents of nature as well as from the temptations of Satan.

^{1[1]} *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life*, Fleming H. Revell Company. Used by permission.

^{2[2]} Genesis 1:26

God wants us to freely choose to do His will and to love Him. He does not want us to suffer. Much of our suffering comes because of our rebellious nature, which has been inherited from all previous generations. We were created to be dependent upon God but, ever since Adam and Eve, we have thought we could do better ourselves. Our rebellion exposes us to the possibility of evil, sin and suffering. Humankind has compounded its suffering over the ages by abusing its use of chemicals, as well as our food supply, our atmosphere, our earth and our water.

God allows our suffering for a reason. It can be a way of redemption, encouraging us to turn from our selfish ways back to obedience and loving fellowship with Him. For when we suffer, most of us want to draw closer to God. Suffering is an anguish that lets us know something needs to be changed. We can also say that suffering is closely connected with freedom. Our troubles prompt us to begin asking questions about life and about God that we may have never asked before. God answers everyone who seeks Him. He gives us His truth and, as we learn to live by it, we discover that it sets us free.

Our reaction to suffering will vary because we also have the freedom to choose our attitude toward it. We can respond in a negative or a positive way. If we resign ourselves to our suffering or deny that it exists, we will not learn from it and we will eventually experience a worse kind of suffering. Jesus died on the cross to take our sorrows upon Himself and free us from the bondage they can bring. If we do not offer Him our suffering, to some extent He died in vain for us. Consider what the prophet Isaiah said about Jesus, "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows . . . he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed."³[3]

Unwillingness to deal with suffering pushes it into our very depths. But it finds its way back in other forms. It may come as anger, depression, bitterness or feelings of anxiety about the future. Some of us try putting the blame elsewhere. We would rather place the responsibility for our pain on other people. We allow dark moods of self-pity, resentment or rebellion to take over. We let them have the power to make us miserable. These moods are like poison which spread throughout our persons making us physically, emotionally and spiritually ill. They use up energy that could have been applied creatively, and they affect all those who come within our influence.

It is easy to see self-pity in others. It is much more difficult to see it in ourselves. One of the best ways of identifying it is when we can connect these words to our feelings: "Why me?" or "If only I had," or "if only I could." What we are really saying is, "Poor me."

What may be hard to accept by some of us is that we often choose our suffering by playing the victim or martyr role. We fan the flames of our pain and find comfort in our discomfort. We may be getting attention or escaping responsibility by doing so. When

3[3] Isaiah 53:4-5 RSV

we keep our pain, we may think we also keep our right to complain, to receive sympathy, to withdraw, or to spoil others' happiness.

We promote our negative thinking by considering only how things are affecting us rather than observing how we are contributing to our unhappiness. Self-pity, resentment and rebellion produce unnecessary suffering and will always harm us. It is tragic when we suffer and never learn from it. That which we have denied may have been our greatest opportunity.

Why do some of us respond poorly to suffering? Perhaps it is because certain values of society, such as appearing successful, teach us to avoid pain and sorrow, to deny anxiety - and we gladly cooperate. We try to act happy, but the deception doesn't work. Pain, sorrow and anxiety surface and we are ill-equipped against hardship. As a result, suffering crushes and embitters us and makes us feel that life has no meaning at all.

Most of us are afraid to suffer. It is certainly understandable, but in order to receive the redemptive blessings God can bring, we are to experience a kind of death to our negative feelings. The Greek philosophers used to say that "the life of wisdom is the practice of death." And Jesus said, "...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."⁴[4] Our trial no longer causes suffering but brings change and transformation. Sometimes, in order to relinquish our losses, it is necessary to grieve. This is an important way to release our sorrow to the Lord and to bring closure. He promises to bless those who turn to Him in their mourning.⁵[5] Sometimes we relinquish old forms of living -- bad habits or harmful ways of responding to life. Dying to these causes feelings of loss and disorientation. But think of our life as a journey from birth to the fullness of eternal life. Along the way we are called to experience the death of old forms of living in order to have new and better life. These deaths are incidents which prepare us for our final death and our full inheritance in God's kingdom.

Think of the life of Jesus. He suffered temptation in the desert but, by not yielding to it, He was born to a powerful ministry. Even though Jesus struggled in the Garden of Gethsemane, He dealt with His fear. Yes, He suffered death, but He was born to a new life of glory. The author of the book of Hebrews wrote about Jesus, "For He himself endured a cross and thought nothing of its shame because of the joy He knew would follow His suffering."⁶[6] We are to persevere in times of trial for the blessings that lie ahead.

⁴[4] John 12:24 RSV

⁵[5] Matthew 5:4

⁶[6] Hebrews 12:2 Phillips

Paul wrote, “For we continue to share in all that Christ has for us so long as we steadily maintain until the end the trust with which we began.”^{7[7]}

The best way to persevere is to stand on the promises of God (see “*Some of God’s Promises*” at the end of this book). There will be times when we see nothing good happening and we wonder if God is at work. These are the times we must “live by faith, not by sight” as Paul taught us.^{8[8]} That is why it is so important to know the promises of God, to underline them in our Bibles and claim them in our lives.

Christians are offered a unique hope by God. It is our confident assurance that He is faithful to His promises. In times of trial, He will not allow us to be tested beyond our ability to endure and He will provide a way out. He promises to work all things together to bring about our highest and eternal good and to fulfill His perfect plan for us.^{9[9]}

Suffering cannot be easily explained. It is real and is not to be denied or belittled. Nevertheless, we can say that suffering is necessary to freedom and to new life. We can offer our anxieties to the Lord and stand against the power of evil.^{10[10]} We can make the best of our circumstances, praising God that He is at work and remains in control of our situation. We can seek His purpose and guidance, remaining faithful in prayer, in public and private worship, in studying the word of God and in fellowship with other Christians. We can also receive the comfort that comes from helping others. These are the ways suffering will accomplish its purpose and become a positive part of our journey as a child of God.

Consider these words of Solomon from the third chapter of Ecclesiastes, “For everything there is a season, and time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance . . . He has made everything beautiful in its time; also He has put eternity into man's mind . . . I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it.”^{11[11]}

If you are experiencing some kind of trial in your life, trust in God's loving care. Seek His wisdom and guidance and ask for His gift of peace. Then praise Him that He is faithful and will see you through to victory!

^{7[7]} Hebrews 3:14 Phillips

^{8[8]} II Corinthians 5:7 RSV

^{9[9]} II Thessalonians 2:16, Psalm 145:13b, I Corinthians 10:13, Romans 8:28, Philippians 1:6

^{10[10]} I Peter 5:7 and Ephesians 6:12-17

^{11[11]} Ecclesiastes 3:1-4,11,14

Questions for Personal Study and Group Discussion

1. There are times in our lives when we experience difficult periods. Sometimes we bring these upon ourselves. Sometimes we are a victim of circumstances. What do we learn from the experiences of Peter and Paul?

a. **Matthew 14:22-33**

What happens when we take the focus of our lives away from Christ in a time of trial?

Question for private reflection:

*Is there something you are suffering now
which you may have brought upon yourself?*

b. II Corinthians 12:7-10

Triumph in Trial Lesson 7

What did Paul mean when he said, "when I am weak, then I am strong"?

- 2.** What does Paul teach us about suffering and the privileges we have as children of God?

Romans 8:14-18

What is the connection between our suffering and our being glorified?

verse 17 _____

3. What important things should we remember about suffering?

Psalm 50:15 _____

I Corinthians 10:13 _____

Romans
8:28 _____

James 1:2-4 _____

Matthew 5:43-44 _____

How do we come to the point where we can love our enemies?

- 4.** There are times when God may use our life circumstances to discipline us. What do we learn about the discipline of God from the book of Hebrews?

Hebrews 12:5-15 _____

How does bitterness harm our relationships?

Question for private reflection:

Has there been suffering in your past for which you still feel bitter or resentful?

5. What creative ways can God use our times of trial?

Romans 5:3-5 _____

II Corinthians 1:3-5 _____

I Peter 1:3-7

Question for private reflection:

What positive experiences have you had through suffering which you could share to comfort others?

- 6.** Paul wrote about the suffering of the apostles. From their example, what can be our response to difficulties? What will be the end result?

II Corinthians 4:8-18

Suffering is a negative unless we apply the positives of our faith. What positives of our faith will help in difficult times?

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”12[1

A Personal Word

It is only through learning to trust in a loving God that I have come to some acceptance of the meaning of suffering. Without this, God would seem to be cruel and heartless at times. My understanding of suffering will always be limited because I am seeking infinite truth with a finite mind.

We bring about much of our own suffering, for we now live under the natural law of cause and effect. So what would seem to be the action of a heartless God is really the result of a fallen world; our selfish pride and our misuse of power.

I realize now that God allows my suffering. It is sometimes the only way He can get my attention and help me put my life back on track. The marvelous lesson of Christ is that suffering can be redeemed. Depending upon my attitude toward it, God can transform the negative into something good for me, for others through me and, ultimately, for the world and His kingdom.
