

Trials and Suffering

I. Introduction

“The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the greatest challenge to the Christian faith, and has been in every generation.” (John Stott)

“One of the major causes of devastating grief and confusion among Christians is that. . . [we] do not give the subject of evil and suffering the thought it deserves until we ourselves are confronted with tragedy. If by that point our beliefs. . . are largely out of step with. . . God,. . . then the pain from the personal tragedy may be multiplied many times over as we begin to question the very foundations of our faith.” (D.A. Carson)

- **Key Idea: God is not silent about trials and suffering.**

James 1:2-4 – Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Romans 8:18-21 – For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

II. Trusting God in the Midst of Suffering

- **Trusting** God can be one of the most challenging concepts in the Scripture.

“I have spent a good portion of my adult life encouraging people to pursue holiness, to obey God. **Yet, I acknowledge it often seems more difficult to trust God than to obey Him.** . . . We do not know the extent, the duration, or the frequency of the painful, adverse circumstances in which we must frequently trust God. We are always coping with the unknown. **Yet it is just as important to trust God and it is to obey Him.**” (Jerry Bridges, Trusting God)

Proverbs 3:5-6 – Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

“Trust in the LORD”	“My understanding”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God is absolutely sovereign over this event and is using this for my good and His glory (Rom 8:28) • God is good. His ways are perfect. He makes no mistakes. He loves me and is expressing His perfect love for me. (Rom 8:1) • God wants me to grow in spiritual fruit. His goal is to make me more like Christ (James 1:2-4). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I don’t deserve this!” • “Haven’t I been good this week?” • “This is so unfair.” • “I just did this last week and I shouldn’t have to do it again.” • “Why does stuff like this always happen to me? No one else has to deal with this!” • “God must be punishing me!”

- **Main Point:** We grow in trusting God when we come to understand that He is absolutely, infinitely worthy of our trust.

“A church is strong or weak just as it holds to a high or low idea of God. For faith rests not primarily upon promises, but upon character. A believer’s faith can never rise higher than his conception of God. A promise is never better or worse than the character of the one who makes it. An inadequate conception of God must result in a weak faith, for faith depends on the character of God just as a building rests upon its foundation.” (A. W. Tozer)

A. **Truth #1: God is absolutely trustworthy because of His absolute sovereignty over all creation.**

Isaiah 46:8-11 – “Remember this and stand firm, recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,’ calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it.

“God did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established. . . “the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God; who being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.” (Westminster Confession)

“There is no attribute of God more comforting to his children than the doctrine of Divine Sovereignty. Under the most adverse circumstances, in the most severe troubles, they believe that Sovereignty hath ordained their afflictions, that Sovereignty overrules them, and that Sovereignty will sanctify them all. There is nothing for which the children of God ought more earnestly to contend than the dominion of their Master over all creation - . . . it is God upon the throne that we love to preach. It is God upon his throne whom we trust.” (Spurgeon)

B. **Truth #2: God is absolutely trustworthy because of His infinite wisdom by which He rules all creation.**

Psalm 147:5 – Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.

Daniel 2:20-22 – Daniel answered and said, “Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him.

Romans 11:33 – Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“*God’s wisdom means that God always chooses the best goals and the best means to those goals. This definition goes beyond the idea of God knowing all things and specifies that God’s decisions about what he will do are always wise decisions: that is, they always will bring about the best results (from God’s ultimate perspective), and they will bring about those results through the best possible means. . .*” (Wayne Grudem)

God's good purpose in suffering:

1. To make the believer more like **Jesus Christ**.

Romans 8:29 – For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

2. To purify the believer's **heart**

1 Peter 1:7 – so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

3. Some of God's purpose is **unknown** – we are called to trust when we don't understand.

Isaiah 55:8-9 – For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.

C. **Truth #3: God is absolutely trustworthy because of His infinite love for those who are in union with His Son, Jesus Christ.**

Psalms 103:13-17 – As a father shows compassion to his children, so that LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.

1 John 4:10 – In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Ephesians 3:14-19 – For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith – that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

III. Learning the Language of Lament

- **Approximately one-third of the Psalms can be categorized as Psalms of Lament or have some element of Lament in them.**

Psalms 13:1 – How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

Individual Lament – “Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD! O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!” (Psalm 130:1-2)

Communal Lament – “O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? Remember your congregation, which you have purchased of old, which you have redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage! Remember Mount Zion, where you have dwelt. Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins; the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary!” (Psalm 74:1-3)

“The lament psalms are blended expressions of grief and trust as suffering believers cry out in anguish asking God some of the most honest and direct questions found in Scripture. They are beloved by believers of every generation because they reflect the sincere questioning of sufferers and resound with the unique emotions that accompany the darkest experiences of life. However, the psalms of lament are also interwoven with a strong thread of faith as the psalmists cling to the belief that God’s steadfast love and unwavering justice will reconcile all of our pain and puzzlement in the end.” (Laura Hendricksen, “Mariana’ and Surviving Sexual Abuse, in Counseling the Hard Cases)

Answering the Objections:

- Lament is **not** grumbling

“Grumbling complaints. . .indirectly declare that God is not sufficiently good, faithful, loving, wise, powerful or competent. Otherwise, he would treat us better or run the universe more effectively. . .But faithful complaining does not impugn God with wrong. Rather, it is an honest, groaning expression of what it’s like to experience the trouble, anguish, and grief of living in this fallen, futile world. . .” (Jon Bloom)

Psalm 142:1-2 – With my voice I cry out to the LORD; with my voice I plead for mercy to the LORD. I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him.

- Lament is **not** blasphemy

Psalm 77:1-3 – I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, and he will hear me. In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted. When I remember God, I moan; when I meditate, my spirit faints. Selah.

- Lament is **not** undisciplined “venting”.

“In the Book of Lamentations each of the first four chapters is arranged in an acrostic pattern.. . Chapters 1, 2, and 4 each have 22 verses which begin with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter 3, the heart of the book, has 66 verses. . . Only chapter 5 is not arranged acrostically, though (like chaps. 1-2, and 4) it has 22 verses”. (Charles H. Dyer, “Lamentations” in Bible Knowledge Commentary)

Common Aspects of Lament (STAT):

1. Expression of **Sorrow** – “My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite, until the LORD from heaven looks down and sees; my eyes cause me grief at the fate of all the daughters of my city.” (Lamentations 3:49-51)
2. Expression of **Trust** – See Psalms 42-43. “There are times when our hope despairs; there are times our despair must learn to hope.” (Martin Luther)
3. Call to **Action** – “Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!” (Psalm 4:1); “Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear to my cry; hold not your peace at my tears!” (Psalm 39:12)
4. Vow of **Thanksgiving** – “I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving.” (Psalm 69:30)