

EDITORIAL COMMENT



Does God Have a Purpose for Our Suffering?

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Suffering: it's awful. We hate it. We run from it like a gazelle fleeing from a hungry lion. We will do almost anything to avoid it. But suffering is an inescapable part of living in this world. God does not spare even His most faithful servants from it.

Since the original sin of Adam, this world has lived under a curse, a curse of suffering and death that will remain until Jesus Christ is revealed as the King of Kings. Our bodies grow old and suffer numerous painful ailments. Exercising their God-given free will, sinful human

of His kingdom. God has ordained that it is through much pain and suffering that God's kingdom would be established and advanced among all the peoples of the earth.

The real question is whether we will accept the assignment or resist it in a futile effort to avoid suffering. What is most important to us—saving our own lives, or being faithful and obedient to God's call to spread His glory in all the earth? The future of world evangelization will depend on how each of us answers that question.

HE IS OUR PRINCE, THOUGH CHRISTIAN, AND HE DID NOT MIND THE PAIN. I MUST NOT, EITHER, BECAUSE I AM THE KING'S SERVANT, AND IT IS WRITTEN IN MY BOOK THAT THE KING'S SERVANTS ARE TO BE LIKE THE PRINCE.

—From *Little Pilgrim's Progress*, by Helen Taylor, p. 106

beings continue to inflict devastating pain on one another. And the blood of the martyrs has often been the seed of the church. In the midst of it all, many are tempted to shake their fist at God and say, "Why me?", as if something strange were happening to them or as if they expect to somehow be exempt from the painful trials of this world.

We should expect suffering in this life—Jesus promised it to us. We cannot expect God to spare us from all suffering when He did not spare His only Son from suffering. But does God have an ongoing purpose for our suffering?

As Bob Sjogren points out in his article (pages 14-15), Jesus came on a mission to suffer and die for the glory of God, and God has appointed us to go and do likewise in the advancement

What is the Highest Priority of Our Lives?

The life of Josef Tson, a Romanian pastor, illustrates the choices we all face when suffering or persecution comes to us. Beginning in October 1974, Pastor Tson was interrogated for six months, up to 10 hours a day, five days a week, simply because of his faithfulness in proclaiming the gospel. The goal of his interrogators was to "break" him, to make him their slave. They wanted him to abandon his faith and become their ally in destroying others who would dare to proclaim the gospel.

One interrogator said to him, "You're going to be shot, but first I want you tortured so you will curse all that you hold sacred and holy."¹ That is exactly what Satan would like each of us to do

when we encounter suffering. He wants us to give up on serving God and distrust God in the midst of our darkest hours. Job's wife urged him to "curse God and die." Satan is defeated when we humbly trust God with our lives and resolutely determine that we will proclaim His glory no matter what suffering or persecution He allows into our lives.

In return for his cooperation, Josef Tson was promised safety and freedom. He was faced with the choice to remain faithful to Christ or to do what his captors wanted and avoid suffering. What was his highest priority: saving his own life or glorifying God?

Pastor Tson responded to the promise of safety and freedom:

"What you offer me is spiritual suicide. I would much rather accept a physical death. To tell you the truth, I don't see any reason to save my own life. Go on, shoot me." Tson reports, "I cannot fully describe that man's fury at that moment. He suddenly realized that the whole plan to break me had failed."

"Why did I say I did not need to save my life? Here is why. During an earlier interrogation at Ploiesti I had told another officer who threatened to kill me, 'Sir, let me explain how I see this issue. *Your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying.* Here is how it works. You know that my sermons on tape have spread all over the country. If you kill me, those sermons will be sprinkled with my blood. Everyone will know I died for my preaching. And everyone who has a tape will pick it up and say, 'I'd better listen again to what this man preached, because he really meant it: he sealed it with his life. So, sir, my sermons will speak 10 times louder than before. I will actually rejoice in this supreme victory if you kill me.'"

In Josef Tson's life he had learned to value Christ and his glory above his

own life, safety and freedom. For him the advance of the gospel was the highest priority, not saving his own life. He knew that this life is not all there is and that a great reward is awaiting him for his faithfulness. The only way he could lose was by abandoning his trust in Christ.

If we are to bring the gospel to every tribe and tongue, we must value Christ and His kingdom above our own lives. Christ is worthy of all we have and all we are. We must choose to trust His sovereignty and His purposes when suffering does come. We must not shy away from proclaiming the gospel in order to protect ourselves, but rather boldly go to every unreached people.

It is hard, especially for Americans, to learn to die to self and the pleasures of this world. The Western, consumer-driven culture is designed around satisfying our every desire and avoiding suffering. This is probably why some in the West have developed a “health, wealth and prosperity” theology but not a theology of suffering. We are taught to live for

the things of this world, and this has infected our churches. But when we come to faith in Christ, we receive a new master who has called us to be on mission with Him, and faithfulness to that mission will involve suffering.

Jim Elliot so aptly said before earning a martyr’s crown, “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” Like Elliot and his four companions who died with him in their attempt to reach the Waorani people of Ecuador, we must be willing to embrace suffering and death, especially when these come by way of our faithfulness to the mission Christ has given to us. The only way to glorify God with our lives is to trust Him with our suffering, even when it makes no sense and seems to serve no purpose.

It’s All About the Glory of God

The purpose of all of life is to glorify God and to make His glory known to every tribe and tongue. This is all part of God’s grand design for history—to raise up worshippers to Himself from every tribe and tongue. As John Piper says, “Missions exists because worship does not,” at least not within all peoples

to the degree that is required for God to receive the glory He deserves.

No sane person seeks out suffering. But we embrace suffering when it comes, trusting in God’s sovereignty and provision, in order to advance God’s kingdom and His glory. We suffer hardship in order to meet the needs of hurting people around the world so they can see a glorious God who loves them and is worthy of their worship. We suffer willingly so that the whole world can see the all-surpassing value of Christ and His kingdom. Why should the peoples of the world believe anything we say if we are not willing to suffer for Christ? Why should we expect the peoples of the world to live for Christ if we are not willing to die for Him? Let us resolve to respond to suffering in our own lives and in the lives of others in such a way that God receives the glory and His kingdom is established in all the earth. ^f

¹The quotes from Josef Tson are excerpted from the article, *Thank You for the Beating* by Josef Tson, which appeared in the Fall 2009 publication of *To Every Tribe*, available at www.toeverytribe.com. Josef Tson has also written the book *Suffering, Martyrdom and Rewards in Heaven*.

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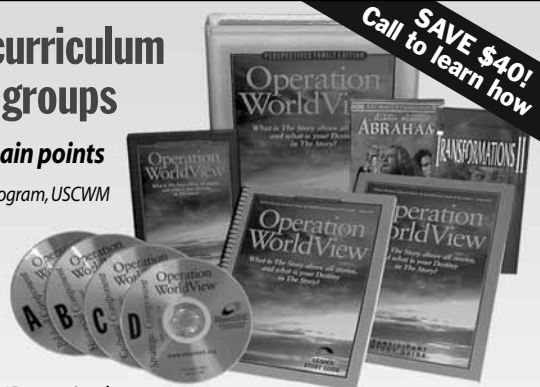
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