

## Why Do The Righteous Suffer?

“If My people who are called by My name, shall humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, forgive their sin and heal their land. Now My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to prayer offered in this place” (2 Chronicles 7:14 & 15).

‘The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous and His ears open to their prayer ... Even if you should suffer for being righteous, you are blessed. Do not fear, neither be troubled’ (1 Peter 3:12 & 14).

‘Jesus gave Himself on our behalf that He might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for Himself a people zealous for good works’ (Titus 2:14).

‘Let us rejoice and shout for joy! Let us celebrate and give Him glory for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready. She has been permitted to dress in fine linen, dazzling and white – for the linen is the righteousness of God’s people’ (Revelation 19:7).

‘Consider it wholly joyful my brethren, whenever you have trials of any kind. Be assured that the trial or testing of your faith produces endurance, but let endurance do its perfect work so that you may be fully grown, lacking in nothing’ (James 1:2 to 4).

‘Beloved, do not be amazed or bewildered at the fiery trial which is taking place to test your quality as though something strange were befalling you; insofar as you are sharing Jesus’ sufferings, rejoice, so that when His glory is revealed, you may also rejoice with triumph ... Therefore, those who suffer in accordance with God’s will, must do right and commit their souls to the One Who created them’ (1 Peter 4:12, 13 & 19).

‘Do not resent the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage and give up when you are reproved by Him; for the Lord corrects everyone whom He loves and He punishes, even scourges everyone whom He accepts to His heart. You must submit and endure discipline. God is dealing with you as with sons ... For the time being no discipline brings joy but seems grievous, but afterwards yields fruit of righteousness in those who have been trained by it’ (Hebrews 12:5 to 11).

‘Blessed is the man who is patient under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the victor’s crown of life which God has promised to those who love Him’ (James 1:12).

Why do bad things happen to Godly people? The answer from the above verses is clear – to humble us; to purify us; to make us ready for the Lamb’s supper; to teach us endurance; to test our faith; to turn us away from wickedness; to make us righteous; to remove our iniquity and there are other reasons why God wants to discipline us. We are not to think suffering is strange. Some people cannot accept that God scourges, corrects, disciplines and chastises those whom He loves. If we believe that He loves us, then we need to believe that He will chastise us. We need to accept that the Word says it is God’s will for us to suffer just as Jesus suffered. We must share His suffering if we are to share His glory (Romans 8:17), because a disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master (Matthew 10:24). The opposite to that is, if we refuse to share His suffering, then we can never share in His glory.

We are all born with a sin nature and God purges that sin out of our lives. Why do bad things still happen even when we pray? Why should we keep on praying when life gets tough? We need to pray for two good reasons: (1) We need to keep connected to God and (2) Jesus prayed. If Jesus needed to pray – and He is God’s Son, then how much more do we need to pray? The need to connect to God through prayer is the most important aspect of our Christian walk. We need to humble ourselves to pray and seek God. Prayer brings forgiveness from sin; it brings healing and helps build our relationship with God. We need to pray every day and we know He always hears us when we speak to Him.

When Christians go through awful trials, they often ask questions like: “Why? Why did this happen when I prayed so much? How could the Lord let this happen? Why does the Lord let this situation go on and on? Can’t He see our suffering? Doesn’t He care any more?” There is nothing wrong with asking why. Wanting to have an answer to a question is not wrong or sinful. Often people get to a point where they don’t want to know ‘why’ any more, they just want the pain to stop. The scriptural answer to why God allows so much suffering is hard for us mortal humans to grasp, and because it is so hard to comprehend, most people dismiss it out of hand and say, “God wouldn’t do that!” Read the whole book of Job and see the trials he went through, then read the verse where it is written that the Lord took responsibility for Job’s suffering. “They

(Job's family) comforted him concerning all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him' (Job 42:11). It is hard for people to understand that God thinks differently to us; He does things differently to the way we do things; so differently in fact that we become confused, angry and some actually walk away from Him. It is hard to comprehend that it is God's will for people to suffer and that suffering is part of His plan for mankind while we are on earth. Before you scream, "That's not what I've been taught," have a look at the underlined scriptures written above to back that statement up. For some people who prefer the easy way out, that is too difficult to accept.

Sometimes we suffer distress as a direct result of sin, sometimes as a direct result of disobedience, and sometimes as a 'blessing in disguise'. For example, if there is someone who loves their possessions too much, then the Lord may allow their home to be plundered to teach them that He is far more important than earthly 'things'. If people love their pet more than they love God, then the Lord may destroy that pet, or He may allow them to suffer illness until they put the Lord back on the throne. If there is a man who refuses to work and provide for his family, then the Lord may bring him to poverty and financial hardship until he learns his lesson. Whenever there is suffering, it is usually for some kind of sin that the Lord wants to deal with. Job was righteous and blameless and his suffering was not brought on by sin, but by fear. 'The thing which I greatly feared came upon me and what I dreaded has happened to me. I had no peace, no quiet and no rest and the anguish came upon me' (Job 3:25 & 26).

We will look at why there are times when God does not answer our prayers in the way we want Him to. Firstly we must understand this important fact: We must obey Him; He does not have to obey us! The Lord promises to hear us every time we pray, however, sometimes situations in our lives can delay the answer to prayer, or the Lord is doing a deep work in our lives that we cannot perceive, or the prayer might be correct but the timing is wrong. If we pray and ask with the wrong motive or attitude, or if we whinge and complain, God will not give us what we want. Apostle Peter said that if a man mistreats his wife, his prayers will be hindered or cut off (1 Peter 3:7). If we delight ourselves in the Lord, then He will give us the desires of our hearts (Psalm 37:4). If however, those desires are carnal, then we will not receive them. 'Make no provision for the flesh' (Romans 13:14). 'Do you ask and fail to receive? Because you ask with the wrong motive; your intention is to use it for your pleasures' (James 4:3). 'Even when we cry and shout for help, God sometimes shuts out our prayers. He covers Himself with a cloud so that no prayer can get through' (Lamentations 3:8 & 44). Only sin brings those particular negative results, but we have the promise that, 'If we freely admit that we have sinned and confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9).

God always hears us when we pray, but sometimes He makes us wait for years before He grants our petition like He did with Sarah (Genesis 17:17; 21:1 to 7); Rachel (Genesis 29:31 & 30:22); Hannah (1 Samuel 1:5 to 23) and Elisabeth (Luke 1:5 to 80), making them all wait until they were desperate before allowing them to have a child. God allowed Jacob to grieve for many years for his son Joseph, before Jacob found out he was alive in Egypt (Genesis 37:1 through to 47:9). Certainly Joseph's ten older brothers could have told Jacob, but they were so guilty of what they did to Joseph, they never said a word. Jacob had a close relationship with the Lord, so the Lord could have told Jacob that Joseph was okay, but He never said a word either. Once Joseph was out of prison he could have sent word to his father to say he was okay, but chose not to, leaving Jacob to mourn. There are many other examples written in the scriptures when God made people wait for His timing before He answered their prayers, but sometimes we need to wait to see what God says on a matter (Numbers 9:8). Sometimes He made His people ask repeatedly (1 Kings 18:43 & 44); or there was something holding up the answer (Daniel 10:12 & 13); or He made them do something before the answer would come (2 Kings 5:1 to 15). Our answer may be just delayed, not refused.

Another hindrance to having prayers answered is doubt. 'It must be in faith that he asks with no wavering. For the one who wavers is like the billowing surge out at sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. For truly, let not such a person imagine that he will receive anything from the Lord, for a man of two minds is unstable and unreliable about everything' (James 1:6 to 8). When we pray, we need to be specific and consistent and not keep changing our minds. We must tell the Lord exactly what we want and trust Him to work it out in His way and in His time. Abraham told the Lord he wanted a son, then tried to 'help' the Lord by producing Ishmael, but that only resulted in disaster (Genesis 16:1 to 16; 21:1 to 21). When we are waiting for an answer, we must resist the urge to 'help' God.

We need to understand that the Lord does not always give us what we ask for, for no other reason than our request may not be His will for our lives. Sometimes the answer to our prayers, is simply a resounding "No." 'This is the confidence which we have in Him; if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us' (1 John 5:14). God is sovereign and it is His will we must obey, whether we like it or not. Jesus prayed three times for God to 'take the cup' from Him, but God did not take it from Him (Luke 22:42). Jesus had the attitude, 'Not My will but Yours be done'. As hard as it can be, that is the

attitude we also need to have. When Paul suffered with the situation he called the 'thorn in his flesh', he asked God three times to remove it but God just said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you." (2 Corinthians 12:8 & 9). Those two answers were a resounding "No." At these times, we can pray as fervently as we want, but if God says "No" then He means "No." We need to seek out and pray wholly in God's will; that is in perfect agreement with His plan, then we are assured He hears us. But we first need to bring our will in line with God's will. How do we know if what we are asking for is His will or not? If we walk closely with God, we can pray and ask what His will is, the Holy Spirit will reveal it and give us peace. If we are still unsure, then we need to be certain our request does not contradict the Bible nor is out of the character of God. We need His guidance because some requests may not be found in the Bible.

There are times when God just does not make sense to us when He refuses our requests, especially when we know what we are asking is fully within His will, but He is the Lord of the whole universe, He owns everything – including us – and He does whatever He pleases (Psalm 115:3). He is God and He does not have to answer to us. We all know of situations or the sense of frustration when we cry out to God, but He does not respond in the way we want Him to. There are examples, such as when someone dies after much prayer for healing, when we know healing is His will; or when a fit and healthy young person prays and asks God to help him find work, yet is rejected from more than 1,000 job applications for no apparent reason, when we know God says, "If a man will not work, neither let Him eat," (2 Thessalonians 3:10), so we know employment is God's will; or when a person who loves the Lord with all their heart, is suffering incessant pain or a crippling disease; or worse, develops a serious, baffling mental illness; or when a woman who has waited years for a Christian husband, is left a widow after just a couple of years of marriage, with a baby on the way; or a Christian, completely innocent of any wrong doing, is arrested, convicted and imprisoned. Just recently, a born-again, God loving, healthy, athletic woman died suddenly, leaving a shattered husband and three very young children to live all their lives without their delightfully loving mother. These are just a few examples of when the Lord just does not make sense to us, and there are many more scenarios we could add here. Sometimes inexplicable trials like these can cause a Christian to turn away from God, but that is not the answer. We are not to be anxious and need to trust God no matter what happens, as did the early Christians when they suffered terrible losses. They trusted God because they held on to the promise of the rewards we will all receive in the Kingdom of God. We need to see that life is not about what happens on earth – it is about eternity. 'For you did suffer along with those who were imprisoned, and you bore cheerfully the plundering of your belongings and the confiscation of your property, in the knowledge that you, yourselves have a better and lasting possession. Do not therefore, fling away your fearless confidence, for it carries a great and glorious compensation of reward. For you have need of steadfast patience, so that you may perform and fully accomplish the will of God, and thus receive what is promised' (Hebrews 10:34 to 36).

What was promised? Compensation of reward; eternal life with all the rewards that go with being faithful to God in the face of terrible suffering. 'Do not fret or be anxious about anything, but in every circumstance, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, continue to make your wants known to God, and God's peace which transcends all understanding shall guard your hearts and minds in Jesus our Messiah' (Philippians 4:6 & 7). We are told, 'to thank God in every circumstance, for this is the will of God for you who are in Jesus' (1 Thessalonians 5:18). No matter what we are suffering, we must thank God. We all need to have the correct attitude and not grumble about our lot. There may be something God wants to deal with in our lives, and the only way that can be achieved is by 'breaking' us. Jesus makes no apologies for that. "Everyone who falls on that Stone (Jesus) will be broken in pieces; but upon whomever It falls, It will crush him as dust" (Luke 20:18).

We need to hang on to the truth of what we will receive, after we go home to be with the Lord, no matter what trials we face here on earth. Paul said, "The Spirit Himself, testifies together with our own spirit, that we are children of God, and if we are His children, then we are His heirs with Jesus; only we must share His suffering if we are to share His glory. But what of that? For I consider that the sufferings of this life, are not worth being compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:16 to 18). We are to take our share of the suffering for the Gospel (2 Timothy 1:8); we are to take our share of the suffering as a good soldier of Jesus (2 Timothy 2:3); we are to be calm and suffer unflinchingly to do the work of an evangelist (2 Timothy 4:5).

Happiness and joy are completely differing entities. Happiness is earthly pleasure; joy is spiritual fulfilment. Surprising as it may seem to some people, it is not written once in the New Testament, that we will be happy with life, but the scriptures do speak of our sufferings, hardships, trials, testing and endurance more than 400 times. The early Christians were told right from the start of their Christian walk, something that modern Christians run away from; 'Stand firm in the faith, for it is through many hardships, afflictions, trials and tribulations that we must enter the Kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22). How many people would keep the faith in this day, if they were told all that on their very first day in church? But, God says we are to rejoice in the Lord always (Philippians 4:4); we are to be content with what we have (Philippians 4:11); and we are to have joy and peace (Romans 15:13). That is one scripture regarding joy, but there is about 190 more. Jesus said we could have

an abundant life (John 10:10), but abundant doesn't mean happy as some people teach, it means to have a full and busy life – busy serving God. It is difficult to understand how we can be suffering yet filled with joy at the same time. 'We commend ourselves in every way as true servants of God, through great endurance, in tribulations, suffering, hardships, privations, sore straits, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger ... as grieved and mourning but we are always rejoicing' (2 Corinthians 6:4). As we can see, joy is spiritual fulfilment and has nothing to do with being happy. Paul would not have been happy about being in prison, in chains, feeling cold and hungry; but he was filled with joy.

We need to know that in our suffering, the Lord never says, "Ohh. You poor Dear." No matter what we are suffering, God may feel empathy but He does not feel sorry for us; quite the opposite in fact. 'So then brace up your drooping hands and strengthen your feeble knees' (Hebrews 12:12). Remember Paul's 'thorn in his flesh' when God just said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9). When Job went through his terrible trials; all his children died; all his livestock died and therefore his livelihood; all his 'great body' of servants died; Job came down with a horrible illness that was so bad he had to sit on the rubbish dump, and because he was so repulsive he couldn't go into town, and then his friends betrayed and criticised him, and after all that, when he cried out to God, the answer God gave him was, "Gird up your loins like a man and I will demand of you, and you will answer Me." (Job 38:3; 40:7); then God proceeded to tell Job off for complaining. Job's suffering was not because of sin for he was an innocent, righteous man as it says in the scriptures more than 30 times. What was Job's attitude to all his suffering? 'Job fell to the ground and worshipped God' (Job 1:20); 'Job did not sin nor did he charge God foolishly' (Job 1:22); 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him and behold, I will maintain my ways before Him' (Job 13:15); 'But He knows the way that I take. When He has tried me, I shall come forth as refined gold' (Job 23:10). What an incredible man Job was! That is the attitude we all need to have during our trials.

The children of Israel suffered many devastating hardships. There is no question they certainly did suffer, of that there is no doubt, but they had the wrong attitude. They ran out of water (Exodus 15:22 to 27; Exodus 17:1 to 6), they ran out of meat (Exodus 16:3 & 13; Numbers 11:31 & 32), they had to fight wars (Exodus 17:8 to 16, Numbers chapter 21; Judges 3:1), they had to get up and pack all their belongings and move on, every time the fire or the cloud of protection moved – even in the middle of the night (Numbers 9:16 to 23) – and they never knew when they would have to move nor where they were going. Their lives must have been incredibly hard, yet when they cried because of their hardships, God became angry with them. In His anger at their complaining against Him and their disobedience, sometimes hundreds or even thousands of them died in a single day by way of bushfire (Numbers 11:1) food poisoning (Numbers 11:20 & 33) earthquake and lightning (Numbers 16:30 to 35) epidemic or 'plague' (Numbers 16:49; Numbers 25:9) and snake bites (Numbers 21:6). No matter what our difficulties, complaining does not achieve anything except to make the Lord very angry, and rather than receiving our requests, life may even become worse.

Jesus was perfect and sinless, yet willingly went through a horrible, painful, dreadful ordeal and death for us, but He did not complain once, even when He knew God the Father would not remove the 'cup' from Him. Because Jesus went through extreme agony for us, in return, we also need to suffer for Him. Unfortunately for us, because of our inherent sin, God cleanses us and that process can be very painful indeed, but we need to focus on the outcome, not the trial. The Apostles also went through terrible trials, but they recognised it as God dealing with their sin and purifying them, even though they were all righteous men. Suffering is God's will for us and we are to rejoice and not be amazed by it. God actually chooses to put us through the 'fire' of affliction. 'Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you and chosen you in the furnace of affliction' (Isaiah 48:10). People who are taught that we will be 'happy clappy' Christians all our lives and nothing bad will ever happen, are in for a terrible shock when God does begin to deal with sin. They can become disillusioned and confused, and will have no consolation and may collapse at a time of stress and pain. It is an incorrect view of scripture to say that we will always understand what God is doing in our lives. We can't comprehend how suffering and disappointment can fit into His plan, but it does. If we are not made aware of this, then sooner or later we will come to a point of bewilderment or dismay. Jesus said when the storms come, not if they come. Storms mean suffering or trials. Jesus said people who are not prepared for trouble are foolish and stupid; but those who are prepared are called wise (Matthew 7:24 to 27). And often, just as we think we can't take any more, God does not release us from the pressure; He just makes us stronger and more able to endure. 'Fear not for I am with you. Do not look around you in terror and be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you to difficulties, yes, I will help you; yes I will hold you up with My right hand of justice ... For I the Lord your God holds your right hand; I am the Lord Who says to you, "Fear not; I will help you"' (Isaiah 41:10 & 13). 'But now, thus says the Lord, He Who created you, and He Who formed you; "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned nor will the flame kindle upon you. For I am the Lord

your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. Because you are precious in My sight and honoured, and because I love you, I will give men (a Man) in return for your life” (Isaiah 43:1 to 4).

So we are to be prepared to suffer, but ... the Lord says He will help us, and will be with us, and will hold on to us, and we are not to fear. He says He will never leave us (1 Kings 8:57; Hebrews 13:5). ‘Many evils (or afflictions) confront of the righteous, but the Lord delivers them out of them all’ (Psalm 34:19). God usually delivers us out of painful or difficult situations eventually, but not always. Usually, the Lord will leave us in the difficult situation until we develop the right attitude and the sin He is targeting has been identified, confessed and forgiven. Once that has taken place, then deliverance from the situation will usually come. Some people though, will suffer all their lives and are only released from their plight at their death. We all need to be prepared to endure trials and difficulties. Being a committed Christian is the hardest life on earth. It takes a lot of character, humility and complete trust in and submission to God, to be able to accept difficulties as being good for us. Sometimes those difficulties are unbearable, but our lives are not for this earth – our lives are for eternity with God. We need to always focus on our eternal lives, and not on the cares of this world. Understanding that our suffering is God’s will and plan for mankind while we are on earth, is too much for some people. They refuse to accept it and go on asking ‘why’? They flip flop around, feeling angry and betrayed, become bitter and resentful and some could end up turning away from God instead of submitting to His discipline. Those who turn away will lose their eternal rewards.

Summing up; ‘What shall we conclude then? Is there injustice on God’s part? Certainly not! For God says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion or pity on whom I will have compassion” (Exodus 33:19) ... So then He has mercy on whomever He wills and He hardens whomever He wills. You will say to me, “Why then does He still find fault and blame us for sin? For who can resist and withstand His will?” But who are you, a mere man, to criticise, contradict and answer back to God? Will what is formed say to Him who formed it, “Why have you made me thus?” Has the potter no right over the clay?’ (Romans 9:14 to 21; Isaiah 29:16; 45:9). Suffering purges sin from us and refines us like gold so we will have no defects. Our goal is to be like Jesus, and when we see Him we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him just as He is, and everyone who has this hope on Him, cleanses and purifies himself, just as Jesus is pure (1 John 3:2 & 3). As long as we are on earth, we will have tests, trials, afflictions and difficulties, all unique to us personally and there is nothing we can do about it but endure the trials; knowing at the end, we will have eternal life and the suffering will be over forever. Through all our trials and good times, we need to have a strong, steadfast prayer life with plenty of praise and worship (James 5:13). We need to have enough trust in God to see that He is doing us good in the long term. Suffering can be grievous, but our heavenly rewards are great.

There is one scripture we can hold on to even in the deepest trial; ‘We are assured that all things work together for good, for those who love God and are called according to His purpose’ (Romans 8:28). But the condition that this works for us is, that we must love God and respond to His calling. We are being purified for the Kingdom of God. The ‘purifying’ process is painful, but the end result will be a state of righteousness so holy, we will be able to stand before Jesus on Judgement Day, look Him in the eye, and not be ashamed of ourselves. He will tell us to enter into His rest and then we will know that our earthly suffering was all worthwhile. It is not wasted. We must consider our suffering all joy, for the eternal outcome will be glorious. We do not have to fear; God will never forsake us. ‘For God Himself has said, “I will not in any way fail you, give you up nor leave you without My support. I will not; I will not; I will not leave you, nor forsake you, nor let you down. I will not relax My hold on you – absolutely not !” So we take courage and boldly say, “The Lord is my Helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?”’

Amen and God bless you.

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