

The Mapmaker's Guide

Map 13 - Suffering for the Kingdom

Spiritual Exercise

James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings. My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. James 1:1-4

Prayer

Father God, finding joy in trials and tests is counter-intuitive in our culture. We confess our fear and avoidance of all things difficult and uncomfortable. Give us grace to welcome the trials and tests You bring our way. Give us wisdom and understanding to count the whole of each trial as a joyful exercise. Give us the grace and courage to walk through each trial with patience - that we may be found perfect and complete, lacking nothing. Do this Father for Your Name's sake and for Your kingdom. In Jesus Christ's name, Amen.

Introduction

Many Christians are prevented from finding joyful, Spirit-filled ministry by their misunderstanding of the suffering that accompanies the normal Christian life. To think that our loving Father would allow tribulation, trial and persecution is difficult for many. Even those that have heard the truth hope that it will not come to them.

Many of us have a tendency to exaggerate our "suffering". Some of us do it very well. Many times our "suffering" is only discomfort, or our not getting what we want. True suffering involves the loss of something that is needed for survival, or the introduction of something that threatens our safety or health. Going without dessert is not suffering. Living without proper nutrition is suffering. Cutting a finger is not suffering (even when it bleeds). Having a finger chopped off for one's faith is suffering.

True suffering comes in many forms: Physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. Suffering in one area readily affects the others. Regardless of the area that is most greatly affected, the most productive way to overcome suffering is to begin in the spiritual realm. From this perspective, we can better understand God's purpose in creating or allowing the suffering - giving us a better chance of taking full advantage of the pain we have been called to endure.

As we search out this matter of suffering, we will discover that it is promised for all that would lead a righteous life, and a blessing that is worthy of our pursuit. It is another of the Kingdom mysteries - something that is foolishness to the world, but grace and liberation to the children of God. Yes, even the truth about suffering will make us free.

For many, this lesson will shift their paradigm about the normal Christian life. This is a good thing. They will be made free in the renewing of their minds. Others will reject the truth and remain captive to the deception. As disciple makers, our responsibility is to present the truth and trust God for the rest.

Definition

Tribulation (*thlipsis*): Primarily means a pressing or pressure, anything which burdens the spirit. It is used of: The calamities of war; want; the distress of a woman in child-birth; persecution; the "afflictions" of Christ, from which his followers must not shrink, whether sufferings of body or mind; sufferings in general. *Vine's Expository Dictionary*

Searching Out the Matter

(All Scripture references, but those noted, are NKJV; Thomas Nelson, Inc.; footnotes and headings excluded)

If It Doesn't Kill You...

What doesn't kill you will make you stronger. If you have done anything difficult in your life - and particularly, if you have whined about it - you've probably heard this from someone. It's a favorite of strength and conditioning coaches, parents and Tour de France cyclists. You may not have appreciated the encouragement at the time, but, deep down, you knew it was true.

Still no one wants to suffer. In fact, most people avoid it as much as possible. Most of us prefer to maneuver around the sufferings that come our way - a major reason why we strive to stay in control of our lives. This does us more harm than good. Counter-intuitive? Of course, but we are talking about His ways and thoughts - not our own, nor those of this world.

Few want to talk about suffering. It makes us uncomfortable. When was the last time your pastor or teacher spoke on the benefits of suffering? Why has suffering gotten such a bad reputation in the church? It's strange, really, given all the Bible has to say to encourage us in suffering, trial, tribulation, etc.

As you read the following passages, open your heart to God's encouragement. By His grace, you will discover the promise, reason, requirement, blessing and joy of suffering for His Kingdom. Reckon these truths to be true for yourself. Invite the Holy Spirit to transform you by the renewing of your mind.

These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world. John 16:33

Christ promised that we "will have tribulation". Tribulation reminds us that we are in a place that is not our home. It comes with a promise: That in Christ, we can overcome the worst that the world has to throw at us.

Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. 2Timothy 3:12

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:10

Persecutions are a part of the normal Christian life ("to live godly in Christ Jesus"); and they are a blessing. Having personally experienced persecution in the Workplace, I can testify that God used it to bless me both spiritually (by removing pride and teaching me a deeper forgiveness and love for others), and practically (by saving me from the persecutor and moving me into a better position in the company).

And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." Acts 14:21-22

And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. Matthew 10:22

In these passages, we see the connection between tribulation and our salvation. God allows persecution and tribulation in our lives as a vehicle for our entry into His kingdom. It begs the question: What are we doing to ourselves when we resist, or work around, the trials and tribulations that come our way?

And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. Romans 5:3-5

The Greek word translated here as “glory” means “to boast in a thing”. Paul boasted in tribulations because it marked him as belonging to Jesus Christ. He boasted because he was being prepared and strengthened for another “glory” - the one that was to come. He spoke of it this way:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory... 2Corinthians 4:16-17

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. Romans 8:16-18

There is a direct correlation between our suffering, God’s glory, and our participation with Him in it. Afflictions, trials, tribulations and persecutions are all opportunities for us to invest in God’s purposes and plans. Additionally (and this is something we need to lay hold of), God has also established that we would benefit from the investment. In fact, the return is far greater than we can imagine.

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. Romans 8:28

You can be sure that God is careful with His words. He does not waste them, nor does He misuse them. Whenever I see “all” in the Scriptures, I know that my Father in heaven is challenging me to believe for more. One of those challenges is believing that God works our suffering “together for good”. Paul helps us understand how:

For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation. 2Corinthians 1:5-7

Our suffering produces consolation and salvation for others, supernaturally empowering them to endure the same suffering. Their suffering does the same for us. This is one of the great mysteries of fellowship and disciple-making.

For example, it is no coincidence when a woman loses her husband within six months of the same tragedy happening to a couple of her friends. There is more supernatural going on here than we recognize - or leverage for God’s kingdom and the benefit of His children. God intends for us to share with each other in the blessings that come with suffering for His kingdom.

I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church... Colossians 1:24

In suffering, we are joined with Christ in His afflictions for His body. Only those that have experienced such suffering can appreciate the level of intimacy this brings to the believer.

Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. 1Peter 4:1-2

Amazing!! Our suffering in the flesh works to eradicate sin in our lives, and encourage our living for the will of God. Suffering plays a significant role in our transformation.

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. 1Peter 4:12-14

The word "partake" is important to our understanding of suffering. It means "partner with", signifying that we are joined with Jesus Christ in our suffering. Could this be one of God's ways for our abiding in His Son?

Additionally, our suffering well with Him brings Him glory. In the process, we are blessed by the joy that comes from that glory resting upon us. In this way, we are obeying Christ's command to "let your light so shine before men that they see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:16)

Sources of Suffering

The more mature we become, the more we can be trusted to suffer for God's kingdom. And as we mature, the source of our suffering changes - becoming more impactful for the purposes of God. There are at least four sources of suffering, and each one is possible in the life of every disciple of Jesus Christ.

1. Many have suffered from the consequences of their foolishness. For example:
 - a. Being fined for filing an inaccurate tax return;
 - b. Having something stolen from an unlocked car.
2. It is certainly true that a loving Father chastens, rebukes and even scourges His children. This is in response to our childish immaturity or waywardness. It is an exercise in discipline and training (Hebrews 12:5-7).
3. Then there is the tribulation and trial that comes from living in a fallen world. Job is a good example. Other Scripture references include John 16:33; Acts 14:22; Romans 5:3-4; 1Thessalonians 3:4; and 2Thessalonians 1:3-8; 1Peter 4:12-13; and Revelation 3:10.
4. Lastly, there is the "suffering with Christ", or "fellowshipping in His sufferings". References here include Matthew 5:10; Philippians 1:29-30, 2:5-8, and 3:8-11; Romans 8:16-17; and other in the lists above.

This "suffering with Christ" is a mysterious and awesome truth. Paul, Peter and John considered sharing in His suffering a great privilege. There is a depth of fellowship with the Savior, in His suffering, that few in the church have experienced. How do we find it? How did He suffer? How should we share in His suffering now?

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Philippians 2:5-8

Christ laid down his reputation, became a slave and died a humiliating and painful death. We have been given the mind of Christ. This passage encourages us to “let this mind be in you”. Said another way, “Let the Holy Spirit transform you by the renewing of your mind. Think like Christ.”

So what might this look like for His disciples? Isaiah 53 gives us a good deal of understanding:

*He is despised and rejected by men,
A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.
And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him;
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.*

*Surely He has borne our griefs
And carried our sorrows;
Yet we esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten by God, and afflicted.*

*But He was wounded for our transgressions,
He was bruised for our iniquities;
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,
And by His stripes we are healed. Isaiah 53:3-5*

He is despised and rejected by men, bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows, wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, and oppressed and afflicted. Certainly, there are sufferings that were for Christ alone; however, we must be careful not to assume that all these are only for Him.

So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.”
John 20:21

The Pursuit of Suffering

There is much for us to unlearn about suffering. For example, I’ve heard some say, “It would be foolish to invite, accept or acknowledge suffering in my life.” This contradicts most of the scriptures we have reviewed thus far. Acts 14:21-22, Romans 5:3-5 and Romans 8:16-17 are good places to start in helping someone see the truth and importance of suffering.

Others have said, “It is one thing to accept suffering, but another to go seeking after it. God does not command us to do that.” I remember agreeing to this - more than once. Searching out the matter of suffering has changed my mind. Here is what Jesus had to say about it.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. John 13:34-35

How are we to love one another? As He loved us! And how was that? To make it clear, He later added:

Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends. John 15:13

Taking up this theme of sacrificial love, Paul encourages the Galatians to “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” (v. 6:2) We cannot bear the burdens of another if we are not actively seeking to know what they are.

Additionally, if it is God’s intention for us to bear them, then we must hear Him say so. To best hear His intention, we must have a heart that is willing to respond to whatever He commands - including what may be our suffering for that person. Our preceding “amen” will only come out of our desire to suffer for them. This is a radical shift in the leaning of our hearts toward one another. It is something the world will not understand. But, by God’s grace and power, our suffering will draw them to the glory that suffering produces.

Conclusion

The truth of Scripture regarding the various forms of suffering requires a counter-intuitive and counter-cultural perspective on life and ministry. It requires a great deal of trust and humility. It requires sacrificial love.

As with most mysteries, a little bit of understanding raises more questions. Here are a few for your continuing consideration:

1. If the various forms of suffering are a blessing, promise and condition, then how much time and energy should we invest in delivering others from them?
2. What about our children? Are we delivering them from a blessing when we bail them out of trial or discomfort? What does this teach them about the normal Christian life?
3. How do we disciple others before, during and after their suffering? How do we know whether to rescue or walk with someone that is suffering?

Once again, we are faced with kingdom challenges that are beyond our understanding. Only the Lord has the answers to these (and so many other questions) about suffering for His Kingdom. In our weakness, we find ourselves wholly incapable of living the normal Christian life.

Be encouraged that there is a way; for our hope lies in the life of the One that can live in this way. This will be the subject of future lessons. For now, let us rest in the truth that “with God all things are possible.” (Mark 10:27)

Application

As disciple makers, Leaders in the Workplace have been given a solemn responsibility to help others walk through the tribulation that God allows for their transformation. Understanding and believing the truth of suffering positions the Workplace Leader to speak life and liberty into the body of Christ. Only those that have been made free are used as instruments of this freedom for others.

Reckoning

The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

Assignment

1. Review your notes and the Scripture passages from this week’s module. Share the ones that are most meaningful to someone in your spheres of influence.
2. What are your convictions and fears about suffering? Share these with someone you can trust to pray for you. For any fears you have, remember: Behind every fear is a lie. Deal with the lie, and the fear will fly.
3. Consider the following devotion. Ask God to work out of you what doesn’t belong, and replace it with His thoughts and ways regarding suffering.

Devotion

From Os Hillman TGIF: Responses to Adversity

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. Habakkuk 3:17-18

When we experience adversity, we generally respond in one of three ways: (1) we become angry; (2) we try to gut it out; or (3) we accept it with joy.

Anger

When adversity comes our way, we say, "Why me, Lord?" We become bitter and resentful and blame God and others for our problems. We view ourselves as victims and demand that God answer our accusing questions: "Why don't You love me, Lord? We feel entitled to life, health, wealth, and happiness.

Gutting It Out

Another way we respond to adversity is by adopting a stoic attitude, repressing our emotions. We lie to ourselves and say, "I'm gutting it out. I'm demonstrating endurance." In reality, we are merely isolating ourselves with a shell of false bravado. We don't meditate on God's love, we don't pray, we don't believe God really has anything good planned for us. We simply tell ourselves, "This will soon be over. I'm a survivor." We never receive what God has planned for us if we stay here.

Acceptance with Joy

This is the response God seeks from us. When adversity comes, we rest in His love and trust that He knows best. We realize that nothing can happen to us without His permission. If there is pain in our lives, we know it's because God deems it necessary for our growth or wishes to use our pain to minister to others.

God revealed to the prophet Habakkuk that Israel was soon to be invaded by the Babylonians. Habakkuk knew that Israel was about to suffer intense adversity as part of God's loving discipline of His people. Habakkuk faced the looming national tragedy with an attitude of acceptance with joy.

If Habakkuk could be joyful in the face of a national calamity, then we can rejoice in the Lord no matter what comes our way.

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