

WHY IS

Life

SO

hard?



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Why is Life so Hard?

The call came at about 10:30 P.M. Someone had died. Would I please call the family? Before I could pick up the phone, the mother called me. Her son had taken drugs and had died earlier that evening. As I got dressed to go to the home, I wondered what I would say. When I got there, everyone was milling around in a state of confusion. At length, the mother took me aside and through her tears asked me the inevitable question. Why? Why did God let this happen to my son?

It was not the first time I have had no satisfactory answer to that question, and it won't be the last. When you consider the problems of this death-sentenced generation, when you see so much suffering you can't explain, even the most fervent believer looks up to the heavens and cries out, Why? Why me? Why now? Why this?

The question rings across the centuries and through every generation. All of us ask it sooner or later. If you haven't yet, you will. It's a question without an easy answer. Indeed, the strongest believers have sometimes wondered about the ways of God. If Job never got a complete answer, what can I expect? As I read the Bible, I don't think there is only one answer to that question.

AN UNEXPECTED ANSWER

But there are answers. Men and women of faith have found them true throughout the centuries. One answer tucked away in the Bible may surprise you. We find it in the New Testament book of Second Corinthians. In the first verses of the first chapter, we discover a perspective on the heartaches of life that may help us.

When tragedy strikes, most of us look over our shoulders, peer into the past, and search through days gone by to see if we can't find some unconfessed sin or the record of a kindness left undone. We search for a glaring misdeed that will explain why misfortune has come our way. Perhaps, we think, some unconfessed sin will rise up to greet us and we will have our answer. "Aha!" we say, "We deserved this tragedy."

The temptation to do that is almost irresistible, but that approach almost always leaves us confused and frustrated. Who can total up the record of his life and be sure he has counted everything accurately?

In 2 Corinthians 1:3-11 we discover a different approach to the trials of life. Some things happen to us so that when we are comforted by God, we are then able to comfort someone else. Here we learn an important principle for all of life. It's not what happens to us that matters; it's how we react that makes all the difference. Years ago a friend told me, "When hard times come, be a student, not a victim." Think about that for a moment.

Be a student, not a victim.

A *victim* says, "Why did this happen to me?"

A *student* asks, "What can I learn from this?"

A *victim* looks at everyone else and cries out, "Life isn't fair."

A *student* looks at life and says, "What happened to me could have happened to anyone."

A *victim* would rather complain than find a solution.

A *student* has no time to complain because he is busy making the best of his situation.

A *victim* believes his hard times have come because God is trying to punish him.

A *student* understands that God allows hard times to help him grow.

A *victim* believes God has abandoned him.

A *student* sees God's hand in everything, including the worst moments of life.

That's the true Christian position. We believe so much in the sovereignty of God that when hard times come, we believe—no, we know!—that God is at work somehow, in some way for our good and his glory. Paul says as much in Romans 8:28. As he begins this letter to the Corinthians, he spells out the same truth in a slightly different way. *Here we discover how affliction works four positive benefits for us.*

IT DRAWS US CLOSER TO THE LORD

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows” (vv. 3-5).

There is a divine purpose at work in your life and mine, and that divine purpose begins with God. Paul calls him the “Father of compassion.” I learned about this many years ago. When our oldest son was still an infant, he often didn’t want to go to bed at night. We would put him in his crib, and then my wife would go to bed exhausted from the cares of the day. About thirty minutes later Joshua would begin to cry. I would roll over in bed and put the pillow over my head, hoping the noise would go away. Eventually I would go to Joshua’s room and pick him up. Holding him with his head on my shoulder, I would walk around the house singing to him. Sometimes I would sing familiar songs, and sometimes it would be “Good little boys don’t cry, cry, cry.” We would walk back and forth through the night. Now I wasn’t a good singer by any means, but my singing seemed to help settle him down. After thirty or forty-five minutes, Joshua would finally fall asleep. I would put him back to bed and go back to bed myself. Now I’m not a perfect father, but I would do that for my son. Would God do any less for me? No, he would do far more. He is a Father of Compassion.

Notice what verse 4 says: **“Who comforts us in all our troubles.”** When I am sick, he is there by my bedside. When I run out of money, he is there with me in my poverty. When the doctor says, “There’s nothing else we can do,” he is there to comfort me. When I am hated and despised, he stands by my side. When I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, he takes me by the hand and leads me through.

We never discover the depth of God’s compassion until we get in a place where we need God’s compassion desperately. You don’t receive mercy until you are in real trouble. During a dinner conversation with another couple, the husband mentioned he had been diagnosed with a very serious form of cancer. As sometimes happens, cancer came despite the fact that he kept himself in excellent physical condition. It started with a pain that seemed like a pulled muscle. When the doctor made the cancer diagnosis, my friend was told he was almost at Stage 4, meaning it was life-threatening. After a harrowing round of chemotherapy, his cancer went into remission. But it’s the sort of cancer that sometimes comes back so you never feel totally at ease. When I asked how cancer had impacted him spiritually, he said that he feels more relaxed. Things that used to bother him don’t bother him as much. Cancer clarified the priorities of his life. He also remarked that he has become a much stronger believer in the sovereignty of God, that God is in control of all things, right down to

the tiniest details of life. He concluded by saying, “I’ve come to see that sickness can sometimes be a blessing.”

The Apostle Paul would no doubt agree. *Cancer is not easy or fun, and it is not “good” in and of itself.* But cancer can be the channel for much good if in your sickness, you discover what matters and what doesn’t. And it will be a very deep blessing if through your sickness, you discover God’s comfort is greater than your sorrow.

We discover a second benefit from our affliction . . .

IT EQUIPS US TO MINISTER TO OTHERS

“If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort” (vv. 6-7).

Paul looked at his sufferings—the hardship, deprivation, imprisonment, and the unrelenting opposition, and he concluded, “This isn’t just for me. God is doing something in me for the benefit of others.”

We never suffer alone.

Someone else is always watching. Our friends watch to see how we will respond to tragedy. They want to know if what we say we believe is enough for us in the hard times. And further in the distance, others watch what we go through. Many of them are unbelievers who wonder if Christ is real. They don’t know, they aren’t sure, maybe they’ve read the Bible, maybe they haven’t, but they’re watching how we respond to mistreatment, malicious accusations, sickness, the loss of a job, the end of our marriage, a career setback, a financial collapse, and from the shadows they watch us to see if what we have is real or not.

That’s exactly what Paul is talking about. *Our afflictions soften our hearts so when we have received the comfort of God, it is easy for us to pass it along to someone else.* Oh, how we need this in the church. It is so easy to be callous. It is so convenient to be unkind. It is so easy to look down our noses at weaker brothers and sisters who are going through hard times. We say so carelessly, “Why don’t they just get tougher? Why don’t they show some backbone? Why don’t they quit complaining and get on with life? Why can’t they be strong like the rest of us?” God lets us go through hard times to break us of that callous attitude. He uses our trials to soften us up so we can minister in the name of Jesus Christ to hurting people.

Chuck Colson went to prison, and out of that harrowing experience he founded Prison Fellowship. Joni Erickson Tada was paralyzed during a diving accident, and out of her suffering came a worldwide ministry to the

disability community called Joni and Friends. This should not surprise us because the Lord's strongest weapons are forged on the anvil of adversity.

Many of us have hardened places in our lives that will not become tender until we go through the fires of affliction. God lets that happen so we are equipped to reach out to others and comfort them.

Our affliction produces a third benefit . . .

IT EMPTIES US OF ALL SELF-RELIANCE

“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us” (vv. 8-10).

We don't know the exact nature of the hardships Paul suffered in Asia (modern-day Turkey). It might have been extreme opposition from the Jewish leaders. It might have been a serious physical ailment. Whatever it was, the Corinthians knew about it and they understood that Paul thought he was going to die. He writes to tell of God's deliverance and to ask the Corinthians for their prayers.

When tragedy strikes or when hard times come or when friends turn against us or when the bottom drops out of life, we wonder why things happen the way they do. Here we find one important explanation. *Hard times come to teach us not to trust in ourselves, but only in the Lord who raises the dead.* Most of us are adept at handling the “moderate” problems of life. We can deal with cranky children or a prickly boss or a bad case of the flu or a pile of work that gets dumped on our desk. We understand normal pressures, and we learn how to deal with them. But sometimes things happen that strip the gears of life and force us to our knees and sometimes all the way down so we are flat on the ground. At that point, when all human options are foreclosed, our only hope is the Lord. We cry out to God in desperation, knowing that if he doesn't help us, we're sunk. That's a lesson we must learn over and over again.

God will never bring you to the place where you no longer need him. Sometimes we secretly (or not so secretly) wish we could be in a position where we weren't so desperate. But if the choice is between self-sufficiency and desperation, it's better to be desperate and cry out to God than to think you no longer need him.

There is one final thing affliction does for us . . .

IT REVEALS THE TRUE POWER OF PRAYER

“As you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many” (v. 11).

I love that phrase, **“You help us by your prayers.”** Paul uses a Greek word that occurs only here in the New Testament. It’s a compound word that comes from three other words meaning “with,” “under,” and “work.” It’s what the Amish do when they have a barn raising. They get under the frame and lift it up together so it is put in the right place. In the same way, we join together and lift the burdens of life as we pray for each other.

Many times we view prayer as the last resort when it ought to be the first resort. Prayer sometimes seems futile because we think we need to “do something.” Praying is fine, but how about if we bake a cake? Well, that’s fine too. But don’t fall into the trap of separating life into the “spiritual” and the “practical,” as if baking a cake is “real help” while prayer is just something spiritual we do when we can’t do anything else. Very nearly the opposite is true. *Through prayer we unleash the power of heaven for the problems we face on earth.* We ought to pray more, not less in times of trouble.

Knowing that others are praying for us gives us strength to keep going. God has ordained that our prayers matter. Pause over that thought for a moment.

Our prayers matter.

Paul is saying, “When I thought I was going to die, you prayed and God delivered me.” *We will never know until we get to heaven how many times the prayers of others rescued us.* But I believe in that great day, when all secrets are revealed, we will discover that we would have fallen, but someone prayed for us. We would have given up, but someone prayed for us. We would have made a stupid decision, but someone prayed for us. We would have given in to temptation, but someone prayed for us. We would have retaliated, but someone prayed for us. We would have crumbled under pressure, but someone prayed for us. When all is said and done, we will learn that God used the prayers of others to enable us to make the journey from earth to heaven, and we will discover that without those God-inspired prayers, we wouldn’t have made it.

PEBBLES IN THE WATER

We ought to pray for others, and we ought to give thanks together when our prayers are answered. When we pray, we join hands with God to bless others and to advance his cause on the earth. Through united prayer we knock holes in the darkness to let the light of Jesus shine in.

No one is exempt from the trials of life. Becoming a Christian is wonderful, but it does not mean all your problems will disappear. *In many ways becoming a Christian may increase your troubles because of spiritual opposition you face.* When hard times come, we only have two choices:

We can suffer with God, or

We can suffer without God.

Let me say that a different way. When hard times come . . .

We can suffer by ourselves, or

We can suffer with the people of God.

As we receive comfort, we are equipped to minister to others. We then pass along to others what God has given to us. This is the very essence of Christianity. We can sum up the whole Christian life in six words:

From God

To us

To others

Every blessing from God comes down to us in a rushing torrent of grace. We discover the love of God, the mercy of God, and the peace of God. We receive salvation, forgiveness, and a brand-new life—all by the grace of God. What God has given to us, we freely give to others.

Have you ever gone to a pond out in the country and thrown a pebble into the water? What happens? From the point where the pebble enters the water, ripples spread out farther and farther. What starts as a ripple from one small pebble soon affects the whole pond. That's a picture of what God is doing in your life. *He comforts you in your trials so you might comfort others who will pass the comfort along to even more people.* The ripple effect spreads out from you to people you may never meet.

Some believers never discover this truth. They are perpetual grippers when things get difficult. To them, life is never fair, they always get the short end of the stick, and they think God has singled them out for punishment. Such people never have a ministry to others because they constantly fight against God's perspective on their trials. They remain tough and hardened when they ought to be soft and tender. As a result, they have nothing to pass along to anyone else.

MISSIONARY EYES

May I suggest one simple step of application? Many of us would like a personal ministry, but we don't know where to begin. Our personal ministry begins as we share with others what God has shared with us. *There are people in your life who need the help only you can give.* Some of them need a word of encouragement, and you are the only one who can give them that word. Some of them are staggering beneath a heavy load, and you are the only one who can lift that burden from their shoulders. Some of them are about to quit, and you are the only one who can keep them in the race. Some of them have been hit with an incredible string of trials, and you are the only one who can help them keep going.

Those people are all around you. Your only problem is that you don't see them. *Pray that God will give you Missionary Eyes.* Those are eyes that see the real needs of the people you meet. Pray that God will bring at least one person across your path who needs the help only you can give. That's a prayer God will answer because there are folks all around you who are just barely making it. You see them where you work, and you live next door to them. Your children go to school with their children. They are out there waiting for someone to give them help. God has helped us for a purpose: that we might take what we have received and share it with those who desperately need it.

You may have heard the term "wounded healer." We are all wounded with the failures of life and the burdens that weigh us down. God has committed to wounded men and women the great ministry of sharing his love with others.

Don't waste your pain. You've come too far and paid too high a price. Use your pain and the things it has taught you to grow closer to the Lord and his people. Use it to minister to others. May God raise up an army of "wounded healers" who will take the comfort they have received and in Jesus' name offer it to a hurting, waiting, watching world.

GOING DEEPER

1. Why is it so difficult to “be a student, not a victim” when hard times come?
2. How have you experienced God’s comfort in a difficult situation?
3. “We never suffer alone.” In the context of this message, what does that statement mean?
4. Name a time when the prayers of others made a positive difference in your life.
5. Think of the people you know who are struggling. What can you do to encourage them?

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