

Living with an Eternal Perspective

Zoom Bible Study | Tuesdays @ 7:00pm (CST)
Led by Mary Lowman

February 21, 2023
Lesson Seven

Transformed Suffering

There are many examples throughout the history of the church of people who have been dealt a terrible physical blow, and that very condition has given them a voice for God that they would never have had otherwise.

- Amy Carmichael served in India, ministering to the worst of society for 56 years without a furlough. The last twenty years of her life she was an invalid because of a freak accident where she stepped in a hole and her back and legs were never the same.
- Joni Erickson Tata is a present-day reminder that God transforms suffering into his glory.
- The Apostle Paul faced a debilitating disability.

2 Corinthians 12:7b:

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.

Paul tells us how God responded to his three-fold plea:

2 Corinthians 12:9 – 10:

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

In his book, *The Hidden Smile of God*, John Piper introduces us to three great men of our faith who suffered greatly in different ways.

- Bunyan suffered unjust treatment and spent years in prison because of his faith, but that confinement led to *The Pilgrim's Progress*, one of the classics of Christian literature. This is a book that has influenced thousands and thousands of people through centuries.
- William Cowper wrote some of the great hymns of our church, words that are awesome in their praise and glory of God. Yet Cowper, this poet of rare beauty and eloquence, suffered greatly with mental anguish and deep depression through all his years.
- David Brainerd was a missionary to the Indians in America in our early years as a country, and he died at a very early 29 years of age of constant sickness, incurable consumption as it was diagnosed in his day. His journal has challenged and encouraged more people to a life of missionary work than perhaps any other single person.

John Piper writes:

“Oh, how we need Bunyan! We are soft and thin-skinned. We are worldly; we fit far too well into our God-ignoring culture. We are fearful and anxious and easily discouraged. We have taken our eyes off the Celestial City and the deep pleasures of knowing God and denying ourselves the lesser things that titillate for a moment but then shrink our capacities for great joy.”

In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Pilgrim is headed to the Celestial City, and he makes his way through many difficulties and struggles by keeping his eye on that eternal City.

Hebrews 13:12-14:

“Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go forth to him outside the camp, and bear the abuse he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come” (RSV).

Referring to Brainerd, Piper writes:

“When you spend the last seven years of your life spitting up blood and die at age twenty-nine, you don’t just say those words – ‘here we have no lasting city’ – you feel them the way you feel the wind on a cliff’s edge. Oh, how many feel the wind and run inland! The call of Christ and the call of Brainerd are exactly the opposite of such a retreat: Since we have no lasting city here, stop working so hard trying to make it lasting and luxurious, and ‘go forth to him outside the camp’ – outside the safe place, outside the comfortable place” (page 170).

Looking at the Unseen

Joshua 6:2 – 5:

Then the Lord said to Joshua, “See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men. March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams’ horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have all the people give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the people will go up, every man straight in.”

Please notice verse 2: “See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands. . .” See?! See what?

We need to see the difficulties of our lives as God sees them and recognize that our walls are nothing more than God’s opportunities.

Psalm 119:67

Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.

So, where are you struggling today? Is it a physical struggle, an emotional one, a relationship struggle, some trial at work or in your home or church? How are you suffering now?

Romans 5:3 – 5:

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Can you see how God has produced good things in your life because of the trials and suffering you’ve experienced? Can you name some of those good things?

James 1:2 – 4:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.(ESV)

The word *count* is a financial term, and it means “to evaluate.” James isn’t suggesting that we pursue trials or hardship; neither are we to pretend that trials are enjoyable to endure. But they exist for a purpose.

2 Corinthians 4:17:

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

Can you imagine yourself receiving an eternal glory beyond anything you could think or ask?

1 Peter 5:10:

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. (ESV)

This is your promise. Cling to it. Claim it.

This is a very short list of all the verses in the Bible that teach us the purpose of suffering, and the way to see it from an eternal perspective. Look them up. Write them on cards. Take them with you. Read them often. Memorize some of them. God’s Word will get you through.