

schools, I was grateful I wasn't suffering the heartache of rebellious children that some of the moms were. But before long, my own daughter, Mindy, made some bad decisions and began to drift away from the Lord.

Although I wanted to pretend everything was all right, I talked about the choices Mindy was making. Some of the other moms in the group faced similar circumstances. We bonded as we cried and prayed over our children's rebelliousness. Though we may be reluctant to share our pain, being honest encourages others as we "carry each other's burdens" (Galatians 6:2).



As we talked, I wondered, *Would I be able to help this friend if I hadn't been through hard times with Steve?* I encouraged her not to give up. I described how God had been faithful to answer my prayers. At that moment, the hurts I had experienced in our marriage seemed worth it, because they opened the door to empathize with someone else. Just as Paul wrote, I realized "we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Corinthians 1:4).

A Proper Perspective on Suffering

As a hospice volunteer, I encounter people who help me maintain a proper perspective on suffering. Once, I spoke with one man who was dying at age 44. When I asked him about God, I was surprised he wasn't bitter. "I thank God for all the good things I've had in my life," he said. People like him inspire me to embrace Joshua 1:9: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."

Others who suffer have reminded me that God's perspective is different from mine (Isaiah 55:8-9). God isn't against me when I suffer—he cares about me enough to save every one of my tears (Psalm 56:8). The people I've sought to serve have instead ministered to me with God's precious truth.

For a guide to leading small-group discussion and a list of other helpful resources, visit www.tyndale.com/discipleshipresources.

A Purpose to Our Pain

Once, I visited a Christian friend who was determined to divorce her husband. God had delivered him from alcohol abuse, but she decided she wanted nothing more to do with him. I shared how my husband, Steve, and I had struggled in our marriage. I shared how I felt when Steve spoke harshly to me. I told her that I, too, had felt like running away on more than one occasion.

"You understand exactly how I feel," she marveled.



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discipleship matters

WE ARE DISCIPLES.
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JULY 2021

5 Myths about Suffering: See Your Pain from God's Perspective

BY STACEY S. PADRICK

"Oh, Lord," I prayed, "please help the doctor find out what is wrong with my body."

For 18 months, I had been desperately seeking a cure for the mysterious virus that often confined me to my bed. I longed to reclaim my active lifestyle, resume working full time, and eventually return to the mission field. Multiple doctors had failed to diagnose the problem. This time I would get answers, but when the lab results came back, my hope of simply "getting over it" vanished. As a previously energetic and ambitious 27-year-old, I watched in fear as an incurable illness crept into every area of my life, threatening my work, my ministry, my finances, my dreams, my relationship with the man I loved, and even my walk with God.

Under the influence of a society that abhors the thought of suffering, we seek to escape the reality of pain in our lives any way we can—television, busyness, entertainment, drugs. Suffering doesn't fit with the world's notion of success or with the theology of God's goodness we often espouse.

But is it possible that our view of suffering has been colored by pervasive myths we have unthinkingly accepted? As I've faced pain in my own life and turned to God's Word for consolation, I've identified five myths that tempt us to shrink back, doubt God, or experience despair during times of suffering.

Myth 1: Suffering is negative and to be avoided at all costs

How often do we pray to know Christ better?

Quite often, most of us would say. But how often do we pray to know him better through suffering? Even though it's difficult to understand, Scripture clearly teaches that affliction and tribulation work to make us complete and mature. James wrote, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work



THE PATH UPON WHICH WE COME TO KNOW CHRIST WINDS THROUGH THE VALLEY OF SUFFERING.

so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4).

For the believer, suffering works on the seeds of faith in the same way manure works as a fertilizer. We abhor the stench of manure and, similarly, the agony of pain. Yet though it seems like waste material, suffering nourishes and feeds the growing fruits of faith and maturity in the garden of our lives. God does not waste any experience in our lives when we willingly surrender it to him.



Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way.

If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get his help, and won't be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought. People who "worry their prayers" are like wind-whipped waves. Don't think you're going to get anything from the Master that way, adrift at sea, keeping all your options open.

When down-and-outers get a break, cheer! And when the arrogant rich are brought down to size, cheer! Prosperity is as short-lived as a wildflower, so don't ever count on it. You know that as soon as the sun rises, pouring down its scorching heat, the flower withers. Its petals wilt and, before you know it, that beautiful face is a barren stem. Well, that's a picture of the "prosperous life." At the very moment everyone is looking on in admiration, it fades away to nothing.

Anyone who meets a testing challenge head-on and manages to stick it out is mighty fortunate. For such persons loyally in love with God, the reward is life and more life.

James 1:2-12 (THE MESSAGE)

Myth 2: We can only experience joy and peace when we are not experiencing pain

Though I tried to consider my suffering as "pure joy" as James advised, my emotions often swayed from peace to anxiety when my body battled unpredictable symptoms. *How could I experience joy when I was losing my health, my independence, my dreams of returning to the mission field, and a love relationship?*

The psalmist wrote: "Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them" (Psalm 126:5-6). When God gave me the seeds of sadness and brokenness, I wanted to cast them aside and implore him to give me seeds of joy and peace instead. But then it struck me that joy and peace are fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), fruit which is often mysteriously born from seeds of suffering. Only as we willingly accept these uncomely seeds and allow him to sow them in our lives will the lasting fruit of joy and peace bloom.

Myth 3: Suffering is a sign of God's displeasure or judgment

As months passed and God did not answer the many prayers of friends and family for my healing, I began to wonder, *Did I do something to invite this? Is this a sign of God's judgment of me?* Then the enemy, prowling about for an opportunity to attack when my spirit and body had grown weary, tempted me to believe that God had condemned me or, at best, overlooked me. Yet turning again to Scripture, I found truth in Paul's words: "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him" (Philippians 1:29).

Rather than a sign of God's disapproval or neglect, adversity is a sign of God's work in our lives. Suffering makes us more like the Author of our salvation. Allowing us to suffer is actually a sign of his grace! He cares so deeply for us that he will do whatever is necessary for us to know him better and to become more like him. God does not test us, as the enemy would have us believe, simply to see how much we can stand. As

an anonymous 20th-century writer penned, "The very fact of trial proves that there is something in us very precious to our Lord; else he would not spend so much pains and time on us."

Myth 4: Only voluntary suffering "for the sake of Christ" has spiritual value in the kingdom of God

To sustain my spirit through the pain, I meditated on verses about tribulation and claimed the hope they offered. Initially, I found comfort in 1 Peter 4:12-13: "Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ."

However, the enemy soon began taunting me: *These verses don't apply to you! They are for those who suffer voluntarily for the sake of the gospel. Your affliction just happened; it isn't a result of your obedience to God.* As I read verse 14—"If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you"—I had to concur that I was not being reviled for the sake of Christ. Perhaps the deceiver was right, and my affliction lacked real spiritual value.

C. S. Lewis disagreed. When responding to a letter from a woman who lamented her ailments and trials (from toothaches to budget problems), he wrote: "Always remember that poverty and every other ill, lovingly accepted, has all the spiritual value of voluntary poverty or penance." These words challenged my narrow definition of suffering for Christ and brought me much comfort. As I committed my illness to God and asked him to accomplish his will through it, my struggles no longer seemed in vain.

Myth 5: If God were truly good, he would remove this suffering from me

Even knowing the maturing benefits of affliction, I grew weary of the struggles. How desperately I longed for God to deliver me from the pain I endured. If God was God, he could do that, right? How tempted I was to believe that if God truly cared about me he would take away the pain.

More often than not, God does not remove

our suffering. But healing is not the only sign of his love. Often he gives us something better: he enters into our suffering. Jesus enters into the fullness of our pain and bears it with us. He is the God who is "close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18).

I finally understood why Paul prayed to know Christ and the fellowship of his sufferings. The path upon which we come to know him better winds through the valley of suffering. If we seek a detour around the valley, we forfeit a chance to walk alongside the Suffering Servant. To know Christ more intimately, to more fully identify with him, I must share in his sufferings by experiencing it myself. Nothing—not healing, not restoration, not success—compares with the comfort and sweetness of this fellowship.

Helping Others When We Hurt

BY ELAINE CREASMAN

When we suffer, we can choose to isolate ourselves, or we can reach out to others. When we isolate ourselves, we feel alone and can convince ourselves that no one understands or cares—not even God. We risk falling into the pit of depression and prayerlessness. But when we choose to reach out in the midst of our pain, we experience several benefits.



THE HURTS I HAD EXPERIENCED OPENED THE DOOR TO EMPATHIZE WITH SOMEONE ELSE.

Deepened Intimacy with Others

When I first joined Moms in Touch, a group that prays for students and leaders at local