

How God Transforms Us

2. Feeling the Heat

Suffering is both the acid test and the catalyst. It reveals and forms faith. It also exposes and destroys counterfeit faith. Afflictions expose illusory hopes invested in imaginary gods. Such disillusionment is a good thing, a severe mercy. The destruction of what is false invites repentance and faith in God as he truly is.

David Powlison, God's grace in your suffering

Change

- Not blaming our circumstances
...but seeing our sin
- Not settling for external change
...but engaging our hearts
- Not just filling our heads with knowledge
...but changing our motivations and desires

[Jesus Christ] gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (Titus 2:14)

Unhappy consequences

- A 38 year old woman with three young children is diagnosed with advanced cancer. A friend encourages her to 'endure hardship as discipline... God disciplines us for our good, in order that we might share in his holiness' and asks her: 'What do you think God wants to teach you in all this?'
- A couple have a stillborn child. A pastoral worker visits them in hospital and prays: 'Lord God 'we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him', please show how this serves your good purposes.'

Discuss: What is the problem with these situations?

The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing (Proverbs 12:18)

Begin with compassion

*But when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them, and **in your great compassion** you gave them deliverers, who rescued them from the hand of their enemies (Nehemiah 9:27)*

*Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice, you earth; burst into song, you mountains! For **the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.** (Isaiah 49:13)*

*When he saw the crowds, **he had compassion on them**, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matthew 9:36)*

*When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, **he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled (John 11:33)***

A personal note

1. Difficulties foster our humility

In order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' (2 Corinthians 12:7-9)

2. Difficulties lead us to our real refuge

*When hard pressed, I cried to the Lord;
he brought me into a spacious place.
The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me? (Psalm 118: 5-6)*

*Before I was afflicted I went astray,
but now I obey your word. (Psalm 119:67)*

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28)

3. Difficulties refine our hearts

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

*See, I have refined you, though not as silver;
I have tested you in the furnace of affliction (Isaiah 48:10)*

NB But none of these things are guaranteed – ‘suffering can make you better...or bitter’

4. Difficulties deepen our compassion

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 receive from God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-5)

Reflection

- How have struggles and suffering featured in your life?
- Can you see ways that God has used those struggles to bring change?
- Is there change that is still in process?

Further Reading

God's grace in your suffering by David Powlison (Crossway 2018)

Saints, sufferers & sinners by Mike Emlet (New Growth 2021)