

Hardships, Suffering and God's Sovereignty

Jesus clearly tells me that I cannot be His disciple unless I make the commitment to follow Him. Quite regularly, as I follow Him, He will allow me to encounter circumstances that I will perceive as unpleasant and often beyond my human ability to cope.

The purpose of this lesson is to help me understand the process in which **every** circumstance, even those that appear insignificant, whether good or bad, pass through God's permissive will. He uses **every** circumstance in His process of transforming me into a holy and useful vessel through which He can accomplish His **eternal** purposes. In other words, I may not know in my lifetime on earth why He allowed a given circumstance.

A Christian who does not understand the significance of God's sovereign control over **all** circumstances will typically respond with complaining, blaming, self-pity, anger or bitterness, because these events may appear to be random. It pleases God when I choose to cooperate with Him by acknowledging to Him my acceptance of what He allows, and seek His direction for the appropriate and godly response, as well as for any lessons He may want me to learn.

1. Is God in absolute control over all that happens in the universe and on earth? Does there exist some person or force that can somehow affect God's sovereign power? Does He always do what is right? Can God do wrong? Can He make mistakes? Is He totally trustworthy?

Deut 32:4 The Rock—His work is **perfect**; **all** His ways are entirely **just**. A **faithful** God, **without prejudice**, He is **righteous** and **true**.

Psa 18:30 God—His way is **perfect**; the word of the Lord is **pure**....

Prov 21:30 **No** wisdom, **no** understanding, and **no** counsel will prevail against the **Lord**.

Job 34:12-16 Indeed, it is true that **God does not act wickedly** and **the Almighty does not pervert justice**....

Isa 46:11 ... Yes, **I** have spoken; so **I will also bring it about**. **I have planned it**; **I will also do it**.

2. Is God in absolute control over all the circumstances and details of my life? (Read and contemplate Psalm 139.)

Acts 17:25 ... **He Himself gives everyone life and breath and all things**.

Jer 10:23 I know, Lord, that a man's way of life is **not his own**; **no one** who walks **determines his own steps**.

Jer 29:11 "For I know **the plans I have for you**"—this is the Lord's declaration—"plans **for your welfare**, not for disaster, **to give you a future and a hope**."

Matt 6:25-27,34 "This is why I tell you: **Don't worry about your life**, what you will eat or what you will drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Isn't life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the sky: They don't sow or reap or gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. **Aren't you worth more than they? Can any of you add a single cubit to his height by worrying? Therefore don't worry about tomorrow**, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

Rom 8:28 We know that **all things work together for the good** of those who love God: those who are called according to His purpose.

1 Cor 10:13 No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to humanity. **God is faithful**, and **He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able**, but with the temptation **He will also provide a way of escape** so that you are able to bear it.

3. The Bible tells me that I should consider hardships and suffering a normal part of my Christian life here on earth.

I should not assume that experiencing hardships and suffering is an indication of God's displeasure. Nor can I assume that His blessings always imply my faithfulness. He is a loving God, and loves me even when I grieve Him.

Note: Consider hardships and sufferings [difficulties] as “anything that **I** personally find unpleasant.” We all understand physical suffering as undesirable. However, because of our diverse personalities, we may have different reactions to difficulties. In other words, one person may watch or participate in a sporting event or other activity and find it exhilarating, while another would view it as a totally unpleasant experience.

- a. Here is one example of a believer who was suffering poverty from the world's perspective, but was rich before God. She was not being punished but was temporarily poor so God could make her eternally rich.

Mark 12:41-44 Sitting across from the temple treasury, He (*Jesus*) watched how the crowd dropped money into the treasury. Many rich people were putting in large sums. And **a poor widow** came and dropped in two tiny coins worth very little. Summoning His disciples, He said to them, “I assure you: This poor widow has put in more than all those giving to the temple treasury. For they all gave out of their surplus, but **she out of her poverty has put in everything she possessed—all she had to live on.**”



- b. The apostle Paul did not view hardships as something unusual. In fact, this long list of hardships happened while Paul was in the center of God's will, seeking to please Him as His servant.

Acts 9:15-16 (*God said of Paul*) “... this man is **My chosen instrument** to take My name to Gentiles, kings, and the Israelites. I will show him how much **he must suffer for My name!**”

2 Cor 6:4-10 (*Paul wrote*) But as God's ministers, we commend ourselves in everything: by great **endurance**, by **afflictions**, by **hardship**, by **difficulties**, by **beatings**, by **imprisonments**, by **riots**, by **labors**, by **sleepless nights**, by times of **hunger**, by purity, by knowledge, by patience, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love, by the message of truth, by the power of God; through weapons of righteousness on the right hand and the left, through glory and **dishonor**, through **slander** and good report; **as deceivers** yet true; **as unknown** yet recognized; **as dying** and look—we live; as being **disciplined** yet not killed; as **grieving** yet always rejoicing; **as poor** yet enriching many; **as having nothing** yet possessing everything.

2 Cor 11:23-27 ... with far more labors, many more imprisonments, far worse beatings, near death many times. Five times I received 39 lashes from Jews. Three times I was beaten with rods by the Romans. Once I was stoned by my enemies. Three times I was shipwrecked. I have spent a night and a day in the open sea. On frequent journeys, I faced dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own people, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the open country, dangers on the sea, and dangers among false brothers; labor and hardship, many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, often without food, cold, and lacking clothing.
 Phil 3:7-11 ... I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of Him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them filth,...



Phil 4:11-13 I don't say this out of need, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know both how to have a little, and I know how to have a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content—whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need. I am able to do all things through Him who strengthens me.

2 Cor 1:7-9 And our hope for you is firm, because we know that as you share in the sufferings, so you will share in the comfort. For we don't want you to be unaware, brothers, of our affliction that took place in Asia: we were completely overwhelmed—beyond our strength—so that we even despaired of life. Indeed, we personally had a death sentence within ourselves, so that we would not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead.

c. Neither did the other apostles find hardships and suffering to be unusual.

Acts 5:40-41 After they (*Jewish leaders*) called in the apostles and had them flogged, they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and released them. Then they went out from the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to be dishonored on behalf of the Name.

1 Cor 4:9-13 For I think God has displayed us, the apostles, in last place, like men condemned to die: We have become a spectacle to the world and to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ,... We are weak, ... we are dishonored! Up to the present hour we are both hungry and thirsty; we are poorly clothed, roughly treated, homeless; we labor, working with our own hands. When we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we respond graciously. Even now, we are like the world's garbage, like the dirt everyone scrapes off their sandals.

Rev 1:9 I, John, your ... partner in the tribulation, kingdom, and endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of God's word and the testimony about Jesus.

d. Neither should I find it unusual when I encounter hardships and suffering.

John 15:18-21 (*Jesus said*) "... because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of it, **the world hates you**. Remember the word I spoke to you: 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, **they will also persecute you**. If they kept My word, they will also keep yours. But **they will do all these things to you** on account of My name, because they don't know the One who sent Me."

John 16:33 "I have told you these things **so that in Me you may have peace**. **You will have suffering** in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world."

Acts 14:22 "It is necessary to pass through **many troubles** on our way into the kingdom of God."

Phil 1:29 For **it has been given to you** on Christ's behalf not only to believe in Him, but also **to suffer for Him**.

2 Tim 1:8 ... share **in suffering** for the gospel, relying on the power of God.

2 Tim 3:12 In fact, **all** those who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus **will be persecuted**.

1 Peter 4:12-16 Dear friends, **don't be surprised** when the fiery ordeal comes among you to test you **as if something unusual were happening to you**. Instead, **rejoice as you share in the sufferings** of the Messiah, so that you may also rejoice with great joy at the revelation of His glory. **If you are ridiculed** for the name of Christ, **you are blessed**, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.... But if anyone suffers as a "Christian," he should not be ashamed but should glorify God in having that name.

1 Peter 5:10 Now the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ Jesus, will personally restore, establish, strengthen, and support you **after you have suffered** a little.

Rom 8:35-39 Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can **affliction** or **anguish** or **persecution** or **famine** or **nakedness** or **danger** or **sword**?... No, in all these things we are more than victorious through Him who loved us.

4. God typically allows suffering for one or more of the following:

- a. To build character into my life
- b. As a consequence of my own disobedience, neglect or carelessness
- c. To be "cast on the Lord" and not rely on myself
- d. To help me understand the needs of others
- e. To use my life to be a blessing to others

a. God uses hardships and suffering **to build character into my life** and **to shape me into a usable and holy vessel**. He alone knows what influences and circumstances will best enable Him to bless me and use me for the purposes that He has designed for my remaining time here on earth.

Rom 5:3-4 ... we also rejoice in our afflictions, because we know that **affliction** produces **endurance**, endurance produces **proven character**, and proven character produces **hope**.

James 1:2-4 Consider it a great joy, my brothers, whenever you experience various **trials**, knowing that **the testing of your faith produces endurance**. But endurance must do its complete work, so that you may be **mature** and **complete**, lacking nothing.

Heb 5:8-9 (*speaking of Jesus*) Though He was God's Son, **He learned obedience through what He suffered**....

1 Peter 4:12-16 Dear friends, don't be surprised when the fiery ordeal comes among you **to test you** as if something unusual were happening to you....

- b. I may suffer the consequences of my own disobedience, neglect or carelessness. Even then, God is faithful and loving and may use my situation as a teaching experience to discipline me. For example, if I am careless with my diet, I may as a result experience physical discomfort or suffering.

1 Cor 11:27-34 (*Paul wrote*) Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy way will be guilty of sin against the body and blood of the Lord.... For whoever eats and drinks without recognizing the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself. **This is why many are sick and ill among you, and many have fallen asleep.** If we were properly evaluating ourselves, we would not be judged, but when we are judged, **we are disciplined by the Lord**, so that we may not be condemned with the world. Therefore, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you gather together you will not come under judgment....

Heb 12:6-11 for **the Lord disciplines the one He loves** and punishes every son He receives. Endure suffering as discipline: God is dealing with you as sons. For what son is there that a father does not discipline? ..., we had natural fathers discipline us, and we respected them. Shouldn't we submit even more to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time based on what seemed good to them, but **He does it for our benefit, so that we can share His holiness.** No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields **the fruit of peace and righteousness to** those who have been **trained** by it.

- c. Sometimes God allows me to suffer, so I learn to depend on His faithfulness, power, and sufficiency, and not on myself, (Proverbs 3:5-6) and recognize my personal weaknesses. (If you are never in a battle, you can't experience a victory.)

2 Cor 1:8-9 (*Paul wrote*) For we don't want you to be unaware, brothers, of our affliction that took place in Asia: we were completely overwhelmed—**beyond our strength**—so that we even despaired of life. Indeed, we personally had a death sentence within ourselves, **so that we would not trust in ourselves** but in God who raises the dead.

2 Cor 12:7-10 ... a thorn in the flesh was given to me, (*Paul*), a messenger of Satan to torment me **so I would not exalt myself**. Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times to take it away from me. But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected **in weakness.**" Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may reside in me. So I take pleasure in **weaknesses**, **insults**, **catastrophes**, **persecutions**, and in **pressures**, because of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

- d. Sometimes God uses suffering to help me identify with the suffering of others in order to be able, with sincere compassion to be helpful to them.

2 Cor 1:3-5 (*Paul wrote*) ... God of all comfort. He comforts us in all our affliction, **so that we may be able to comfort those** who are in any kind of affliction, through the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For as the sufferings of Christ overflow to us, **so through Christ our comfort also overflows.**

Heb 2:10, 17-18 ... it was entirely appropriate that God ... should make the source (*Jesus*) of their salvation perfect through sufferings. Therefore, **He had to be like His brothers in every way, so that He could become a merciful and faithful high priest** in service to God.... For since He Himself was tested and has suffered, **He is able to help those who are tested.**

1 Peter 5:9-10 (*Peter wrote*) Resist him (*the devil*) and be firm in the faith, knowing that **the same sufferings** are being experienced by your fellow believers throughout the world. Now the God of all grace... will personally restore, establish, strengthen, and support you after you have suffered a little.

- e. Sometimes God allows me to pass through hardships in order for Him to shine through my life in a greater way so that others see Him through me. (A light is most visible and significant in the darkness.)

Matt 5:14-16 (*Jesus said*) “You are the light of the world.... **let your light shine** before men, so that they may see your good works and **give glory to your Father** in heaven.”

John 9:1-3 As He was passing by, He saw a man **blind from birth**. His disciples questioned Him: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” Jesus answered. “This came about **so that God’s works might be displayed in him.**”

Acts 16:22-34 Then the mob joined in the attack against them (*Paul & Silas*), and the chief magistrates stripped off their clothes and ordered them to be **beaten with rods**. After they had inflicted many blows on them, they **threw them in jail**, ordering the jailer to keep them securely guarded. Receiving such an order, he put them into the inner prison and **secured their feet in the stocks**. About midnight Paul and Silas were **praying** and **singing hymns to God**, and **the prisoners were listening** to them. Suddenly there was such a violent **earthquake** that the foundations of the jail were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s chains came loose. When the jailer woke up and saw the doors of the prison open, he drew his sword and was going to kill himself, since he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul called out in a loud voice, “Don’t harm yourself, because all of us are here!” Then the jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he escorted them out and said, “Sirs, **what must I do to be saved?**” So they said, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” Then they spoke the message of the Lord **to him along with everyone in his house**. He took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds. Right away **he and all his family** were baptized. He brought them into his house, set a meal before them, and **rejoiced because he had believed God with his entire household.**

5. God will sometimes require me to re-prioritize the things I hold dear [my idols] so He can replace them with His best, which will have eternal benefits for me and others (e.g. contentment, material possessions, friendships, health, etc.).

Matthew 5:11-12 (*Jesus said*) “You are blessed when they insult and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of Me. **Be glad** and **rejoice**, because **your reward is great in heaven**. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Acts 4:32-35 Now the large group of those who believed were of one heart and mind, and **no one said that any of his possessions was his own**, but instead they held everything in common.... all those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles’ feet. This was then distributed for each person’s basic needs.

Rom 8:17-18 (*Paul wrote*) ... seeing that we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. For I consider that **the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing** with the glory that is going to be revealed to us.

Heb 11:17-19 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, **offered up Isaac**....

1 Peter 1:6-7 You rejoice in this, though **now for a short time** you have had to struggle in various **trials** so that the genuineness of your faith—more valuable than gold, which perishes though **refined by fire**—**may result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ**.

6. My responses to His designed circumstances are an indicator of my willingness to accept what He has planned for me and to entrust myself into His care.

- a. Jesus showed me by example what my attitude and response should be.

Matt 26:51-53 ... one of those with Jesus reached out his hand and drew his sword. He struck the high priest’s slave and cut off his ear. Then Jesus told him, “Put your sword back in its place ... **Or do you think that I cannot call on My Father, and He will provide Me at once with more than 12 legions of angels?**”

John 19:9-11 (*Pilate*) said to Jesus, ... “Where are You from?” But Jesus did not give him an answer. So Pilate said to Him, “You’re not talking to me? Don’t You know that I have the authority to release You and the authority to crucify You?” “**You would have no authority over Me at all,**” Jesus answered him, “**if it hadn’t been given you from above**....”

Heb 12:2 ... **keeping our eyes on Jesus**, the source and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that lay before Him **endured a cross** and despised the shame and has sat down at the right hand of God’s throne.

1 Peter 2:19-23 For it brings favor if, mindful of God’s will, someone **endures grief from suffering unjustly**.... But when you do what is good and suffer, **if you endure it**, this brings favor with God. For **you were called to this**, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you **an example, so that you should follow in His steps**. He did not commit sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth; when He was reviled, **He did not revile in return**; when He was suffering, **He did not threaten** but **entrusted Himself to the One who judges justly**.

b. The apostle Paul chose to entrust himself into God's loving care.

Acts 20:22-24 ... I (*Paul*) am on my way to Jerusalem, bound in my spirit, **not knowing what I will encounter** there, except that in town after town the Holy Spirit testifies to me that **chains and afflictions are waiting for me**. But **I count my life of no value to myself**, so that I may finish my course and the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus,...

2 Cor 12:7-10 ... He (*God*) said to me (*Paul*), "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Therefore, I will most gladly **boast all the more about my weaknesses**, so that Christ's power may reside in me. So I **take pleasure** in weaknesses, insults, catastrophes, persecutions, and in pressures, because of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Phil 4:12 I (*Paul*) know both how to have a little, and I know how to have a lot. **In any and all circumstances** I have learned **the secret** of being content—whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need.

c. Consider Job's response to losing almost all he possessed (Job 1:1-19), including his children, and then his physical health (Job 2:1-8). Job's response pleased God.

Job 1:20-22 Then Job stood up, tore his robe, and shaved his head. He fell to the ground and **worshiped**, saying: Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will leave this life. The LORD gives, and the LORD takes away. **Praise** the name of Yahweh. **Throughout all this Job did not sin or blame God for anything.**

Job 2:10 ... "Should we accept only good from God and not adversity?" **Throughout all this Job did not sin in what he said.**

d. Consider Joseph's response to the hardships that God allowed.

- His jealous brothers **hated** him and **sold** him into slavery to foreign traders, who took him to **Egypt** (Gen. 37:3-36).
- Then he was **falsely accused** of attempted rape and **innocently** suffered in prison (Gen. 39:1-40:23 and Psalms 105:17-19).

In these verses, Joseph spoke of God's faithfulness and sovereignty to his brothers.

Gen 41:52 ... **"God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction."**

Gen 45:5 And now don't be worried or angry with yourselves **for selling me** here, because **God sent me** ahead of you to preserve life.

Gen 45:8 Therefore it was **not you** who sent me here, **but God**.

Gen 50:15, 19-20 When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said to one another, "If Joseph is holding a grudge against us, he will **certainly repay us for all the suffering** we caused him."... But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You **planned evil against me**; **God planned it for good** to bring about the present result—the survival of many people."

7. Our Daily Bread (March 21, 2005) – A Bumpy Road

When people tell me life is hard, I always reply, "Of course it is." I find that answer more satisfying than anything else I can say. Writer Charles Williams said, "The world is painful in any case; but it is quite unbearable if anybody gives us the idea that we are meant to be liking it."

The path by which God takes us often seems to lead away from what we perceive as our good, causing us to believe we've missed a turn and taken the wrong road. That's because most of us have been taught to believe that if we're on the right track God's goodness will always translate into a life free of trouble.

But that's a pipe dream far removed from the biblical perspective. God's love often leads us down roads where earthly comforts fail us. Paul said, "To you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Philippians 1:29). When we come to the end of all our dark valleys, we'll understand that every circumstance has been allowed for our ultimate good.

"No other route would have been as safe and as certain as the one by which we came," Bible teacher F. B. Meyer said. "If only we could see the path as God has always seen it, we would have selected it as well." —David Roper

*If some darker lot be good,
Lord, teach us to endure
The sorrow, pain, or solitude
That makes the spirit pure. —Irons*

No trial would cause us to despair if we knew God's reason for allowing it.

FOR FURTHER STUDY Go to <http://www.rbc.org/rtb/4rsn/>
"10 Reasons To Believe In A God Who Allows Suffering"

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8. Wisdom from Oswald Chambers – The Surrenderd Life

We are not fundamentally free; external circumstances are not in our hands, they are in God's hands, the one thing in which we are free is in our personal relationship to God. We are not responsible for the circumstances we are in, but we are responsible for the way we allow those circumstances to affect us; we can either allow them to get on top of us, or we can allow them to transform us into what God wants us to be.

CONCLUSION: God is worthy of my trust. I can always count on Him to do what is in my best interest.

When I stand before Him in heaven, and understand what He was doing in my life here on earth, I will have no regrets for the times when I trusted Him fully.

He does not desire for me to look at hardships with solemn resignation, neither to pursue suffering for its own sake, but rather with childlike faith to accept what comes from a Father who loves me beyond human understanding.

I Peter 4:19 So those who suffer according to God's will should, while doing what is good, entrust themselves to a faithful Creator

Psalms 33:18-21 Now the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him—those who depend on His faithful love to deliver them from death and to keep them alive in famine. We wait for Yahweh; He is our help and shield. For our hearts rejoice in Him because we trust in His holy name.

Psalms 34:4-8 I (*David*) sought the Lord, and He answered me and delivered me from all my fears.... This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him and saved him from all his troubles. The Angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them. Taste and see that the Lord is good. How happy is the man who takes refuge in Him!

Rom 8:31-32 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He did not even spare His own Son but offered Him up for us all; how will He not also with Him grant us everything?

1 Thess 5:16-18 Rejoice always! Pray constantly. Give thanks in everything, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.