

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Suffering

As you think about some of your fellow missionaries, you realize that many of them are suffering greatly.

- One man has been in constant physical pain for years because of a problem with his back.
- A woman had a small fortune when she came to serve, but poor financial decisions by friends back home have left her virtually penniless.
- One couple worries constantly about their wayward son who is living as a street person back in their passport country.
- Another couple receives many heart-rending e-mails from their daughter living with a man to whom she is not married.
- Yet another couple cannot forgive themselves because their teenage daughter was molested by a national years ago.
- After nearly two decades of service, a missionary family sees its influence nearly wiped out when a cult comes in.

The list could go on and on. How could it be that faithful missionaries could suffer so much physically, emotionally, financially, and so forth? They have been faithful in their service. It seems like God just does not care. Where is God anyway? God rewards his children, doesn't he? Does he keep his promises?

What's going on?

The problem is that we have many "Christian" cultural beliefs that are not true.

- God builds a hedge of protection around his people so they will not suffer.

- If we live in God's will, we won't suffer.
- Suffering means we have sinned.
- Suffering has no positive results.
- We have no joy if we suffer.
- If God really loves us, he will not let us suffer.
- God punishes us with suffering.

Again this list could go on and on. A much longer list appears in the comments of Job's "friends" in chapters 4-37. Job's comments in those chapters showed that he did not understand what was going on, but he was sure his friends did not know either. Let us look at what Jesus himself told those who were following him.

What did Jesus say?

When his disciples asked Jesus what it would be like for His people near the end of time, Jesus listed much suffering (Matthew 24, John 15-16).

- Famines
- Earthquakes
- Persecution
- Death
- Hatred by all nations
- Betrayal by people who left the faith
- Hatred by people who left the faith
- Killings by people who believe they are serving God as they kill

Jesus went on to tell the disciples that he told them about these things so that when they actually came they would remember that he had warned them (John 16:4). We should not be surprised when we suffer.

More specifically, he told his twelve disciples what it would be like when they went out to serve. He told them they would experience the following (Matthew 10):

- Be handed over to local councils

- Be flogged in synagogues
- Be arrested
- Be betrayed by family members
- Be killed
- Be hated by "everyone"

What happened to Paul?

We can read not only about Jesus warning but also about what actually happened to Paul, an early cross-cultural worker. Paul actually listed his sufferings in 2 Corinthians 11).

- 39 lashes from the Jews (5 times)
- Beaten with rods (3 times)
- Shipwrecked (3 times)
- Imprisoned
- Stoned
- Hungry, thirsty, and cold
- Labor, toil, and sleeplessness
- In danger from rivers, bandits, false brothers, people from passport country as well as nationals.
- In danger in the city, in the country, and at sea.

Cross-cultural workers today experience similar suffering, although they are more likely to be in airplane crashes than shipwrecks.

Do we have to suffer?

During his first term of cross-cultural service, to encourage and strengthen people, Paul told them, "We must suffer..." (Acts 14:22). Why would we have to suffer? Sometimes suffering is the only way to reach a particular goal. For example, most people have experienced getting a splinter in their hand or foot. This frequently happens during childhood, and children often want to leave

the splinter in rather than suffering as the parents remove it.

However, the parents *know that* if the splinter remains, it will become infected and may turn into a serious problem. The parents also *know that* the only way to get the splinter out is to dig it out. Assuming that the parents do not take every splinter to a physician where anesthesia is available, removing the splinter causes some suffering as it is removed.

Why would anyone rejoice in suffering?

The answer is in the "know that" phrase which is in italics in the paragraph above. When you "know that" your suffering is the way to develop particular traits, you can rejoice as you consider the goal.

James wrote that we should "consider it pure joy" when we face trials because we *know that* this leads to perseverance, which then leads to maturity (James 1:2-4). It is not that we enjoy the suffering, but we rejoice because we *know that* we are moving toward maturity.

Romans 5:3-4 states, "Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we *know that* suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." Again, our joy comes not from the suffering itself, but we rejoice because we *know that* we are moving toward character and hope.

It also helps to *know that* we are not alone in our suffering. Peter, a third culture kid, tells us to stand firm "because you *know that* your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings" (1 Peter 5:9). You are not alone, Christians all over the world experience similar sufferings as they develop perseverance, character, hope and maturity.

Does suffering always lead to perseverance, character, hope and maturity?

It can lead to these characteristics, but it does not always do so. Suffering may result in people becoming either better or bitter, depending on how they respond to it. The writer of Hebrews points out that God, our heavenly father, disciplines (not punishes) us like our earthly parents do (Hebrews 12). Just as people differ in their response to their parent's discipline when they are children, so do people differ in their response to God's discipline when they are adults.

The writer of Hebrews encourages us to endure hardship as discipline and notes that everyone experiences discipline. Our earthly parents do what *seems* best to them, but our heavenly father does what *is* best for us. "God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace" (Hebrews 12:10-11).

Each of us chooses whether or not to accept God's discipline gracefully (Psalm 119:71) to develop perseverance, character, hope, maturity, righteousness, and peace or to reject his discipline and become bitter toward him and about life in general. We choose whether to become better or to become bitter.

How do I respond while suffering?

Most of the information above is cognitive in nature, and it is important for you to think on these things. Likewise, it is important for you to watch what you say to yourself, your self-talk. Talking to yourself

about God takes your eyes off your problems and focuses them on God. The Psalms have many good examples of such self-talk.

- "Why are you downcast, O my soul?..." (Psalm 42:5)
- "Find rest, O my soul, in God alone..." (Psalm 62:5)

In addition, you must be honest about the emotions you feel. Jesus was in Mark 14:33-34, Matthew, 26:38, and Luke 12:50).

- "deeply distressed and troubled"
- "overwhelmed with sorrow"

Likewise, Paul was honest about his emotional reactions.

- "great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears" (2 Corinthians 2:4)
- "anxiety" (Philippians 2:28)
- "fear" (2 Corinthians 7:5, 12:20)

King David, no stranger to suffering, wrote about these same emotional responses in the Psalms.

- Distress (Psalm 4:1, 18:6, 25:18, 31:9)
- Anguish (Psalm 6:3, 25:17, 31:10, 38:8)
- Fear and anxiety (Psalm 34:4, 56:3 94:19)

Of course, your most valuable resource when suffering is the Bible which has much to say about it. Many of the Psalms are prayers to be sung during times of suffering. Use your software or concordance to find what the Bible has to say about such emotions during times of suffering. Pray the Psalms that most closely match your own suffering.

We are not to seek suffering either in masochistic tendencies or as "Christian martyrs." Neither of these is a sign of God's favor, just as suffering is a sign of God's disfavor. However, we can take comfort in knowing that God will use the suffering he allows to make us more like him.

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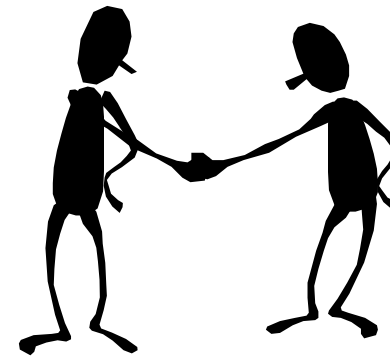
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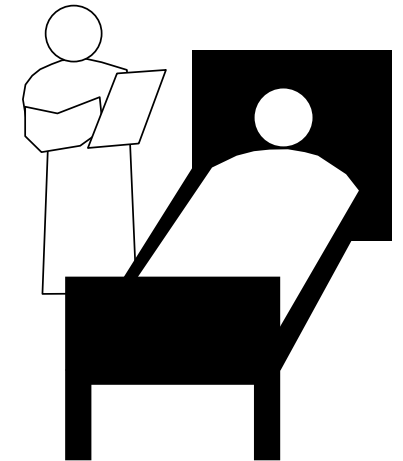
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