

Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament  
K. Discipleship Challenges  
31. Suffering and Faith

In our next three lectures, we'll be looking at some things that pose significant challenges to would-be disciples of Christ. There are many such challenges, but I'll focus on three things that seemed to be particularly difficult for God's Old Testament people, and which continue to be difficult today. The first one we'll be dealing with is the effect suffering has on one's faith.

A common opinion is that suffering makes faith difficult or even impossible. The perception here is that if an all-good and all-powerful God did exist, he wouldn't allow such suffering. And that usually leads to one of these conclusions: "I don't believe there is a God." Or, "If there is a God, he is not to be trusted."

But Scripture comes to a different conclusion. Already from the Old Testament there is much insight to be gained about the causes of suffering, and more importantly, about God's response to suffering, about how we should respond to it, and even about how suffering can actually help strengthen one's faith and trust in God.

Suffering began, as we learn already in the first chapters of the Bible, when Adam and Eve rebelled against God. Their disobedience in the matter of eating the forbidden fruit was really the consequence of their conviction that God did not know what was best for them. But they soon found out differently, as suffering came into their lives (and the lives of their descendants). They found out about pain and frustrating work and relationship problems. And they also came to understand something of the ongoing spiritual conflict that lay before them.

God did indicate that Satan would eventually be defeated, in his promise (Gen. 3:15) that the woman's offspring would crush the serpent's head—i.e. deal him a final and mortal blow. But until that final outcome, God also indicated that Satan would have leeway to "bruise the heel of"—i.e. afflict—the offspring of Adam and Eve. The ultimate offspring in view was Jesus, but, of course, the whole human race also has suffered the afflictions of Satan.

Gen 3:15 calls these afflictions a "heel strike." But, as we've found out, this is no small thing--irritating but not truly harmful. Isaiah uses these descriptive words (ch 53) to indicate the extent of Jesus' sufferings: despised, rejected, man of sorrows, stricken, smitten and afflicted by God, pierced, crushed, oppressed, cut off, etc.

And Hebrews 11 likewise pictures the suffering that some of Jesus' followers have had to go through: mistreated, persecuted, jeered, beaten, chained, imprisoned, tortured, and several ways of being killed: stoning, sawing in two, burning, sword... The bruised heel of Gen 3:15, in other words, can and does include torture and physical death.

This battle continues today because the final judgment on Satan has not yet taken place, although the death blow has been struck by Christ's resurrection victory at Easter. But it may be a while yet before the end of the current troubles of our world. And so the perpetual question on our hearts and tongues is similar to the main one on the hearts and tongues of the biblical writers: "How Long, O Lord before our suffering ends?"

This question is common in the psalms of the Bible.

- Ps 13:2 *How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?*
- Ps 74:10 *How long will the enemy mock you, O God? Will the foe revile your name forever?*
- Ps 89:46 *How long O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?*
- Ps 90:13 *Relent, O LORD! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants.*

The prophets also asked the question. I'll give just one example, from Habakkuk 1:2-4:

- *How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.*

The biblical writers were concerned not only about the professed enemies of God and his people and the suffering caused by them, but also about problems within the family of God—weakness and hypocrisy—which cause their own share of suffering.

“How long, O Lord?” is a question that asks for God’s help. But there’s another important question that goes with it: What can the righteous do in such a world? Is there even anything we can do? David asked this very question in Psalm 11:1-3. He writes: *In the LORD I take refuge. How then can you say to me: "Flee like a bird to your mountain. For look, the wicked bend their bows; they set their arrows against the strings to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart. When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?"*

We don't know the particulars of David's trouble here. This might be from the years his life was threatened by King Saul. Or David could have written this later in life during one of the significant challenges he faced during his reign—like that from his own son Absalom. Whatever his current situation, the world seemed upside down. It seemed that righteousness was not being rewarded, but punished. So, he asks, When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?

“Very little” it seems to many. And even trying can get you into trouble. So some people, seeing the foundations being destroyed, calculate the risks and forget doing anything about it if it’s too risky. David had some advisors like that. "Flee like a bird to your mountain," they said. "When the foundations are being destroyed, all the righteous can do is do whatever it takes to survive and leave resistance to another day.

Or, try this popular alternative. “Make the bad guys pay; give them a taste of their own medicine.” Even if it means using the tactics of the unrighteous to advance the cause of righteousness.

When the foundations are being destroyed what can the righteous do? "Run away," or "Get them back." Two conventional answers, which just so happen not to be biblical ones. It’s not that flight is never wise. Sometimes it is smart. But the real issue as David saw, was the matter of whom he would trust in the midst of the foundation-destroying attacks of those trying to get him. Would he trust to his own devices or trust himself to God who put him in office?

And that's the appropriate question for everyone who suffers the attacks of Satan in this interim time before his full defeat. David's words in Psalm 11:4-7 are good for every sufferer to remember: *"The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD is on his heavenly throne. He observes everyone on earth; his eyes examine them. The LORD examines the righteous, but the wicked, those who love violence, he hates with a passion. On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot. For the LORD is righteous, he loves justice; the upright will see his face.*

When you suffer, it's always best to take refuge in the sovereign Lord. It may appear that the righteous are fighting on the losing side, but that is not the reality of the situation. "The Lord watches what is happening and I trust that he will act when he decides the time is right." David doesn't ask God, "What takes you so long?" here at least. Elsewhere in the Bible we find out that perhaps it's because God, who is not willing that any should perish, is being patient and waiting for more people to give their lives to him. But here, God is silent. Even so, David, by faith, knows that he is on the throne, watching and approving of the righteous. He is also watching and hating the violence of the wicked.

At the same time, God uses the opportunity to examine the righteous. He sets them tests to see and to improve the nature of their hearts. He does it, not coldly or indifferently, but with parental concern. Nothing proves faith and righteousness more completely than the obedient actions of those who, despite all the reasons to doubt God, keep trusting him.

The result of God's thorough observation and examination is the appropriate reward for the righteous and the wicked. The word that the psalmist uses to describe the mode of delivery of the reward of the wicked, is "rain." God's rain upon the wicked, is a destroying rain. It is like that which destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah in the time of Abraham; it is a rain of fire and brimstone. But, at the same time, the righteous get their appropriate reward; they receive the blessings that God showers upon his people. As watery rain nourishes the desert, so his gracious spiritual rain nourishes weary souls. The righteous will see God; they will see his justice; their side will prove to be the right one after all.

In the meantime, all those who suffer should know the good God can bring from it. In fact, we might learn something about this from the experience of the Israelites, on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land. Even though God had miraculously delivered them from Pharaoh's grasp, they soon discovered that they weren't yet finished with hardship. And some of this hardship, if not from the Lord, was at least used by him to test his people.

For example, at Marah, the Lord turned bitter water sweet after which, Ex 15:25-26 tells us, *The Lord issued a ruling and instruction for them and put them to the test. He said, "If you listen carefully to the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes..., I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, who heals you."*

Shortly afterwards, the people were grumbling about the lack of food to eat. That's when (Ex. 16:4): *The Lord said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions..."*

It was especially in the provision of manna, that God taught Israel two lessons about how he expected them to respond, not only in good times, but also in the face of every hardship and bit of suffering they faced. The first was, "What I give you each day will be enough for you."

Here's how God taught that lesson. When the people gathered the manna (Ex. 16:18): *He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little. Each one gathered as much as he needed.*" Amazing, it came out just right. When Israel followed God's instructions they had enough but not too much.

It is not unusual for people to be afraid, especially in times of suffering, that God's provision for the moment will not be enough for them. But what the apostle Paul later taught in 2 Cor. 12:9 was already evident here and in the other hardships Israel faced: "My grace is sufficient for you."

And there's another lesson that correlates to this one: "You have to trust God for tomorrow just as you had to trust him today." Some of the Israelites didn't quite believe that. So, contrary to God's command, they gathered manna not only for one day, but also for the next day. Trouble was, the extra manna spoiled and got stinky; it became food for maggots. The people learned eventually that they couldn't hoard God's blessings for themselves as insurance for the day when God wouldn't care for them. They had to trust God every day.

So do we. There is no insurance that will allow us to live without trusting God day by day. What's more, if we keep for ourselves what God doesn't want us to keep, then we'll stink up our lives with it. Sure, we need to be discerning about the distinctions between saving and hoarding, or between being stewardly and stingy; those are important distinctions. But remember that the purpose of the manna for Israel was not only to provide for the need of the people (16:4), but also to test whether God's people would follow his instructions, even in times of hardship and suffering.

Dt. 8:3 reminds Israel and us what God did in the desert and what he keeps doing in today's deserts: *"He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."* Jesus thought so much of this gem from God that he later used it to ward off a direct attack of Satan.

Hardship makes you hungry; when you get hungry you're supposed to feed on Manna, which is the Word of God. And as you get close to God and rely on him, he will always give you just what you need to meet your hardship, just enough, not too much or too little. But you can't store up the grace and gifts of God. Take advantage of whatever grace and gifts God offers you every day. But don't try to hoard them for yourself so that you won't need to rely on him again tomorrow.

Dependent living is a day-by-day process. You will need to take advantage again tomorrow of the grace and gifts he offers, for tomorrow's needs. And what you gather then will again be just right. And as you keep doing that you will come to know God as your healer and your provider and your Lord and master. And you will come to know yourself as continually and totally dependent on him, daily anticipating more of his refreshing word and presence to nourish you and keep you going.

I suppose I shouldn't leave this topic of suffering and faith without a brief look at the book of Job; in which Job and his friends debate the matter of suffering. Still, I tend to agree with Philip Yancey, who contended a few years ago in an article in *Christianity Today*, that Job is less about suffering than it is about faith. You see, although we know the reason that Job suffers—it's because God allows Satan to test him—this book tells us very little about the reasons for human suffering in general. But it does tell us a lot about faith.

As Job goes through an increasingly severe test, the question is, "Will Job believe in God or deny him?" Satan believes that if God takes away the rewards, then Job's faith will crumble. "After all," thinks Satan, "Who can keep believing and trusting even when God starts looking like an enemy?" Is this kind of faith even possible? It certainly doesn't seem probable to Satan, or for that matter according to our own logic.

Now, of course, Job doesn't know that he was on trial. To Job, it seems more like God is on trial. He begins by questioning God's fairness and goodness and love, and despairs of his own life. Yet, in the end, Job refuses to turn his back on God. *Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him* he defiantly insists (13:15). He may have given up on God's justice, but he stubbornly refuses to give up on God. Even in despair, he eloquently expresses his hope and faith.

16:18-20 *"O earth, do not cover my blood; may my cry never be laid to rest! Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high. My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God.*

19:25-27 (the beginning of which has been made famous by a song in Handel's Messiah): *I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes-I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!*

Job still wonders why he must suffer so much. But he is made to see, in the end, that he just doesn't know enough to question God (42:1-3): *Then Job replied to the LORD: "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. [You asked,] 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know... My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.*

The end of the story then, is that God wins the wager with Satan, and then blesses Job with twice what he had in the beginning. These rewards and blessings were good, I'm sure. But in a sense they had to be secondary to the benefit of the faith that Job had proved in the fires of his adversity. The security he gained from such fire-proved faith was far more valuable to him than any material blessings he received.

Suffering will remain a problem for us until Christ's return to put an end to sin and make all things new. We'll probably never know all the reasons for it, or be happy to suffer. But we should know that our faithfulness and obedience matters. Job's faithfulness proved Satan wrong in supposing that he served the Lord simply for the benefits to himself. And something similar happens today. God will use every bit of our faithfulness in suffering to advance his purposes—strengthening the faith of those who suffer, but also using their suffering to change their world, and contribute to the future God is preparing for all his faithful disciples.