The Joy of Suffering  
  
I want to talk a little today about the false view that God guarantees us health, wealth and a carefree lifestyle. This was absolutely necessary for a number of obvious reasons. We are to uphold truth. The belief that our inheritance is in this life distorts the scriptures, therefore, it is impossible to understand the higher purposes of God without first correcting the misunderstandings many are taught to believe.

If we are taught that we are guaranteed a healthy, prosperous life in tranquillity, then suffering can only mean failure of our own spiritual lives or frustration against God for failing to meet our expectations. Many teach that suffering is the result of sin, a lack of faith, or the anger of God. If this were true, each time we suffer we would have to ask, “Why me?” or, “What have I done?” What Christian can thrive and spiritually mature under the constant fear of falling out of favour with God? The faith of many Christians is overthrown because they view trouble as the disfavour of God. If this were true, all the apostles were under God’s judgment. Consider this passage from 1 Corinthians 4

*For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonoured! To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. And we labour, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the off scouring of all things until now.*  
If these men did not understand suffering, then they would have given up and could never have endured to the end. If their only hope in this life was suffering and then death, how could they endure? Even the apostle Paul stated that if there was no eternal hope, they should eat and drink to live it up until the time to die. Instead of men of sorrow, defeated in this life, in Acts 5, we see the apostles rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for Jesus’ name.   
  
It is a travesty and an injustice to every believer that the church has avoided the topic of suffering as though it were a plague. Human nature longs for comfort and peace. We, by nature, will avoid suffering at any cost. I don’t want to suffer and I don’t know anyone who does want to suffer. However, suffering is a part of life. We live in a fallen world and we dwell in a world that is at war with God. Both spiritually and physically, creation is not as it was created to be. One day God will restore all things, but the road to eternity passes by many hardships. The travesty is that the church does not equip believers to expect suffering. Jesus made it clear, “***These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world***”. It is the responsibility of the church to disciple others to understand the purpose behind trouble and to equip them to find joy in the midst of their suffering. Let’s examine the joy of suffering.  
  
Examples to Follow James 5:10-11

*My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord -- that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.*  
The prophets, the apostles and Job were all examples of suffering. The twelve apostles were men who gave up everything for the sake of the Cross. They lost their property; they lost their freedom; they lost health and were beaten; and ultimately they lost their lives. The prophets were no different. They were imprisoned, beaten and murdered for proclaiming the word of the Lord. The churches that flourished under the apostles also were plundered and impoverished and the Bible repeatedly encourages them to endure and look ahead to the end result. Our supreme example comes from Christ Himself.

Hebrews 12:1 *Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*  
Did Jesus find joy in the cross? Did the apostles find joy in suffering? Did the prophets find joy in the shame they were forced to endure? No. The joy each of these found was beyond their circumstances. It was for the joy that was set before Him that Jesus endured the cross. Jesus’ earthly mission was to endure the cross, but He also saw beyond the cross. He saw our redemption and the glory that we will one day share with Him. The apostles did not enjoy their beatings and persecutions; they rejoiced because they were looking ahead to the promise that they will one day receive. Job endured great suffering but he remained faithful and saw the mercy of God. He found out that the suffering was necessary so that he could inherit a greater promise. The suffering may well have lasted for years, but the time was short compared to the inheritance he obtained and the eternal inheritance he will obtain.  
  
Suffering is a Blessing

Not all blessings are wrapped in beautiful packages. Sometimes, the beauty we pursue turns out to be fools gold. Which is a greater blessing, a carefree life with no eternal value or suffering packed with the promises of God? Where there are no storms, life has no depth.

When you find someone who has never suffered you will quickly see that they have a very shallow and self-centered perspective on life. By our human nature, we think that prosperity alone is a blessing. Sometimes it is, but so is suffering if we are enduring with godly motives. Look at 1 Peter   
  
*3:14 But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you are blessed. "And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled."  
  
4:12- 16 Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.  
...  
19 Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator.*  
In the midst of our trials, verses 13-14 says that we should rejoice because we are blessed.

When we suffer, the glory of God rests upon us. This passage flies in the face of what most of us have always been taught. Scripture teaches us that when we become partakers of His suffering, His Spirit and glory rests upon us. When someone suffers, they have a special place in God’s heart. It may feel like we are enduring a long road alone, but in reality, God is carrying us through it. When I am in pain, I am honoured by becoming the bearer of God’s glory. Instead of seeking a way out, I should be enduring and placing my trust on Him all the more.

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 says:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ.*  
What most Christians don’t realize is that the comfort and promise offered through suffering are not available any other way. If I avoid suffering by refusing to follow God through the darkest times of my life, I don’t just bypass the suffering, I also bypass the glory of God in my life. If I endure out of necessity but become bitter against God or bitter against those who cause me pain, I have exchanged the glory of God in my life for self-pity and anger. Pain only is a tragedy when we are looking at it from our temporary circumstances. Suffering is not intended to singe my soul, but to refine me into a vessel of immeasurable value. I am only burned when I am taking control. When I am trusting Christ, then He shapes me and my trouble becomes a trophy of God’s grace.  
  
Enduring Suffering

2 Timothy 3:12 tells us, “*all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution*” and Jesus said in John 16, “*In this world you will have trouble*”. No one is exempt from suffering or persecution. We live in a world that is at war with God; therefore we can’t expect to be welcomed when we stand on His name. Not only are we targeted by people who reject Christ, but the Bible also warns us that we are in a war against a spiritual enemy – the devil.

Many Christians have a misconception that God hedges us and keeps us from trouble. I firmly believe that God has His protection around us, but we are not exempted from trouble. However, we have the absolute assurance that every problem, trial, suffering and trouble has a purpose that God is working in our lives to fulfil His will so we will inherit His abundant promises. All things work to the good of those who love God AND are called according to His purpose. Those who are blind to His purpose and seeking their own purposes will fall away when trouble arises and will resist God’s working in their lives. Read Matthew 13  
3 *Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying: "Behold, a sower went out to sow "Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. "But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away.*

*"But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.*  
This comes from Jesus’ parable of the sower. The seed was the word of God and the plants are those who receive His word. There are many who are looking for a gospel that centres around selfish desires. God calls us to go where He is going. When He is going through the valley of trouble, those seeking ‘self’ will fall away at the first sign of trouble. If we can only shift our focus off our circumstances and look at the big picture, we will see that God tests our faith to strengthen our relationship with Him and trials only serve us, they can never destroy us against our will.

We need the perspective of Romans 8:16 -18

*The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs -- heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.*  
Suffering in this life is so insignificant in light of eternity that it is not even worthy of a comparison. It may not seem this way when we look at our circumstances, but when we look out to the joy set before us, it is nothing. Suffering is not even a drop in the bucket. What an amazing promise! We will be glorified together with Christ! Is it worth the trade off to be mocked and then rewarded with being glorified with our Creator? Are a few weeks, months or even years of suffering worth enduring for the promises of God? Now let’s reverse the question. Is the promise of God worth trading away in order to avoid suffering? Ultimately, that is the decision we all will make. Which side will we sacrifice? If we say that heaven is worth it, then read 1 Peter 2:18-23

*Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth"; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously;*The hardest thing you will ever do in this life is suffer wrongfully. The person who mistreats you does not have the right to do so. Yet the Bible says, if you suffer wrongfully and take it patiently, God will reward. Obviously, there are times when we must take a stand, but the question is, what kind of a stand are we taking? The key to this passage is Jesus’ example – “When He was reviled, he did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously”. Above all else, we must commit ourselves and the wrong done to us to God who is the righteous Judge. He alone has the right to judge. When we are enduring hardship at the hand of another person, this should always be in the front of our thoughts. Are we committing ourselves to God our righteous judge? Are we taking matters into our own hands, or are we allowing God to work in our lives and use suffering for our good?  
  
Christ Will Restore

Look at Joel 2:25-26

"*So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, The crawling locust, The consuming locust, And the chewing locust, My great army which I sent among you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, And praise the name of the LORD your God, Who has dealt wondrously with you; And My people shall never be put to shame.*  
Suffering is like a farmer who spends his whole life labouring to bring a crop to the harvest. Just as the crop is ready, a swarm of locusts fills the sky and consumes everything he has worked for. Year after year after year, the labour for these crops are lost to the thieving locusts. Perhaps you have felt this way in your life or maybe experiencing this now. Every effort is taken away by the consuming locusts of life. Whether it is a relationship, job, health or anything that we hold precious. We have a sure promise. Those who endure and wait on the faithfulness of God will be restored. All the years that the locusts have eaten, God will restore with more abundance. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, that you can lose in this life that He will not restore. It may be in this life or it may be in Heaven, or it may be in both. One thing that is sure, the best reward is to those who are made to wait until the life to come.

Look at 2 Timothy 1:12

*For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day.*  
Are you willing to stand on the assurance that God is able to keep what you have committed into His trust? It may very well be completely justifiable to get out of your trouble or circumstances. I am not by any means diminishing the pain many may be going through. What I am trying to say is, don’t take it out of God’s hands. You may be able to handle the problem and solve it, but if you forfeit God’s purpose He is working in you, is it worth it?  
  
If there is one point I could drive home, it is, don’t bypass the plan of God for a moment of peace. Our peace is for only a moment. Our troubles are for only a moment. His peace and His promises are forever. If we take our circumstance out of God’s hands, we are bypassing the above promise that God will restore the years the locust have eaten. Every passage on suffering drives home the point that if we endure faithfully, we will be glad. It is a hard decision to endure when we know that we have the power to find another way out. However, we must carefully and prayerfully choose our path. God will never give us a way out that violates His word. God will never condone any actions that violate His word in any way. The Bible clearly promises us that God will never allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear. Make every decision with the mindset of committing yourself to Him who judges righteously. Then you can be certain that He will restore the years that have been consumed and your reward for trusting Him will be eternal.