

How to Respond to Personal Suffering

Hebrews 12:4-11

B.I. How we respond to difficulty, hardship and tragedy reveals the true substance of our faith in God.

Read Heb. 12:4-11

This week the elders, and a number of you, have had opportunity to interact with Elizabeth Martinez about her cancer. We were absolutely amazed at how faithfully she is responding to this difficult and likely terminal trial. Her body is full of cancer and the doctors say that the best they can do is to slow down the inevitable effects of this disease, perhaps by only a few weeks. On the one hand, this is terrible and devastating news. No one wants to come face to face with death, especially not this way. On the other hand, however, this terrible event has turned into a beautiful thing because Elizabeth is responding to it in such a faithful, joyful, and worshipful manner. As I spoke with her at her bedside this week, she was alert and very conversant about what she is experiencing. And yet, though she is a fairly new believer, she never once complained. There was not a hint of self-pity. She just smiled and gave thanks to God for His promises of sins forgiven and future grace. Some of the women have also recounted that as they sat with her and sang God's praises, Elizabeth would raise her hands toward heaven in tearful, joyful adoration of the God who promised to be with her in life and in death. Joe told the elders yesterday that at one point that little hospital room became such a sanctuary of worship that he felt that place had become just as holy as the ground Moses stood on before the burning bush. Beloved, this is not only a refreshing to see, but a powerful witness of how believers should respond to the difficult trials of life.

This morning I believe the Lord would be pleased to have us think for a few moments about how we typically respond to difficulty, hardship and tragedy. As American Christians we don't face the kind of persecution that the recipients of the book of Hebrews did, but we often ask the same questions when faced with various forms of suffering.

If Jerry Bridges could speak to us today he would probably say something like what he wrote in his excellent book, *Trusting God*. He writes,

Adversity and its accompanying emotional pain come in many forms. There may be the heartache of an unhappy marriage or the disappointment of a miscarried pregnancy, or grief over a spiritually indifferent or rebellious child. There is the anxiety of the family breadwinner who has just lost his job and the despair of a young mother who has learned that she has a terminal illness...

On a much smaller scale, those whose lives are free from major pain still experience the frequently frustrating or anxiety-producing events of daily life which momentarily grab our attention and rob us of our peace of mind. A long planned vacation has to be cancelled because of illness, the washer machine breaks down the day company arrives, your class notes are lost or stolen the day before a major exam, you tear your favorite dress on the way to church, and on

and on...

It is true that such mundane events are only temporary and pale into insignificance alongside the truly tragic events of life. Yet, for most of us, life is filled with such little events, little frustrations, little anxieties, and little disappointments that tempt us to fret, fume and worry... And it is in the crucible of even this minor level of adversity that we are tempted to wonder, "Can I trust God?" (from *Trusting God*, Navpress; p. 14-15)

In chapter 11 of the book of Hebrews, the author offers a whole litany of biographical sketches of faith. There we read about men and women who "pleased God" by their faith in such a way that it can rightly be said of them that "God is not ashamed to be called their God" (11). The author's point is that in the face of suffering, both potential and actual, we must learn to exercise the same kind of faith as was manifested in the lives of these O.T. heroes.

Now most of the passage before us is designed to give instruction on how to exercise this kind of faith. But this morning I want to camp out in the first two verses (v. 4-5). Because here the author speaks to us about some common and *unbiblical* responses to various kinds and degrees of suffering. This is a short passage, but I have found it to be absolutely bursting with instruction for our good.

What are some common, unbiblical and unbelieving responses to suffering?

I. We commonly over-state the intensity of our suffering:

1. Read v. 4
2. Have you ever had to listen to someone drone on and on about all their aches, pains and problems, half of which are relatively inconsequential and the other half strike you as being more imaginary than real? I mean, half way through their dirge about how bad life is you find yourself secretly plotting how you can escape the conversation without losing your dignity.
3. When I read verse 4, I hear the author saying, "Cut the melodrama!" "Give me a break!" You're way over-estimating the intensity of your present and potential suffering. "*You have not resisted to the point of shedding blood*" so quit your whining!
4. The reference to "shedding blood" here, points back to two significant examples of faith.
 - A. The first is in verse 2, where he exhorts us to fix "*our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross.*" Jesus ended up being nailed to a Roman cross for *His* faithfulness to God, but He never once complained about his circumstances. Peter says, "*When being reviled, He did not reviled in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously*" (1 Pet. 2:23). Jesus never turned back. When they were driving the nails into His feet and hands, He didn't become angry with God. Rather, He cried out, "*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!*"

Some will say, “Well, that’s because He is God.” Okay, but there is another example. In fact, a whole list of examples of men and women whose blood was shed but who did not turn from their faith in Christ.

B. We see this in the previous chapter, verses 36-38, “*others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy).*”

5. Who were these people? For the most part, they are anonymous, faithful saints. They were just average, everyday men and women who were resolved to be ruled by the promises of God rather than by their feelings. Their trust in God enabled them to be faithful unto death.

6. Beloved, if we were honest, many of us would have to confess that we can identify with the winners of chapter 11 far less than with the whiners of chapter 12. When faced with a painful circumstance we tend to default to a complaining, unbelieving spirit rather than faith in God’s promises. But that doesn’t please the Lord, “*for (Heb 11:6) without faith, it is impossible to please God.*”

7. And by the way, isn’t a complaining spirit just another manifestation of pride in the heart? I think John Piper is right in saying arrogance is the pride that says “No one appreciates how much I have accomplished,” and self-pity is the pride that says, “No one appreciates how much I suffer.” It’s pride.

8. Now if you find that listening to all of this stings a little, just know that I’m not talking to you. I’m talking to the person next to you. And I’m speaking to myself. But isn’t it true that we, like the original recipients of this letter, often over state the intensity of our suffering? Compared to those who have *really* suffered *in faith*, our problems are small-potatoes. But they are none the less, opportunities for us to exercise faith in the promises of God.

9. So the first typical response to suffering is to over-state its intensity. Second,

II. We neglect to bring God’s word to bear on our suffering:

1. Verse 5 says, “*and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord.’*”

2. A second reason why we often don’t respond to trials and suffering more faithfully than we do is because we neglect to bring the word of God to bear upon the trial. We forget the “*exhortation which is addressed to us.*” We forget what the word of God says. We forget God’s promises, His commands, His wisdom and His warnings. And when we do that we are in perfect position to be *crushed* by our problems.

3. Now, the author is quoting a specific exhortation out of Proverbs 3. But lets first notice the label that he puts on our sufferings. He calls it “discipline.” More than that, it is “*The discipline of the Lord.*”

4. The first thing the word of God would have us know is that our difficulties, hardships and

tragedies are intended to be seen as *discipline from the Lord*. Now I realize this needs some explaining, so let's go a little deeper.

- A. The GK word for Discipline is *paideia* which is a term that comes from *pais* (child). It denotes the training of a child. In Judaism a father was required to provide for the instruction of his sons and daughters and to teach them good behavior sometimes by verbal instruction and sometimes by corporeal punishment.
- B. The word refers to whatever parents or teachers might do with the intent of instructing and training a child into maturity.
- C. The author is changing his analogy from that of a race (v. 1-3) to that of a family. He's saying that we need to view our suffering not as happening in a meaningless vacuum, but through the lens of relationship. Specifically, our relationship with God
- D. Again, Jerry Bridges is helpful here. He writes, "In the arena of adversity, the Scriptures teach us three essential truths about God - truths we must believe if we are to trust Him in adversity. They are:

- * **God is completely sovereign**
- * **God is infinite in wisdom**
- * **God is perfect in love**

God in His love always wills what is best for us. In His wisdom He always knows what is best, and in His sovereignty He has the power to bring it about." (*Trusting God* p. 18)

- E. Beloved, this puts an entirely different complexion on our trials and suffering, doesn't it? It tells us that the next time the surgery doesn't go well, or the atmosphere at work turns hostile, or your spouse becomes cold and unloving, or you crash your bike at an intersection on the way to work and get injured, or when the loneliness hangs over you like a perpetual dark cloud; when bad things happen we know that God who is completely sovereign, infinite in wisdom and perfect in love has *designed* this trial for our good!
- F. You say, what good can possibly come out of my losing my job, or my baby, or discovering I have terminal cancer? God answers that in Rom. 8:29. Besides all the lesser intentions God may have for it, we know that He designed it to conform us a little more to the image of Christ.
- G. For this we should rejoice. That's why James writes, "*Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And **let** endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*" (Jam. 1:2).

5. Verse 7 of Hebrews 11:2 says, "It is for discipline that you endure..." The NIV reads, "*Endure hardship as discipline.*" In other words, when *any kind of hardship comes* I should speak to my soul and say, "Soul, do not think that this has happened to you for no reason. Everything that

happens to you comes through the infinitely loving, wise and sovereign hand of God for your good. Therefore, I will hope in the Lord. I will trust that this is part of His plan for my life. I will resolve to let it fulfill its purpose in me. And I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.”

6. This is what the Psalmist did in Psalm 42 when he brought truth to bear upon his feelings by saying to himself, *“Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him For the help of His presence.”*

7. Beloved, if we are going to learn to respond to suffering in faith, we must learn to discipline ourselves to bring the word of God to bear upon our trials. We must learn to speak truth to our souls. As the author has already said in 2:1 *“For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.”*

8. The first two common and unbelieving responses to suffering are that we tend to over-estimate the intensity of our suffering; and we neglect to bring the word of God to bear on our suffering. Third, sometimes...

III. We make light of God’s purpose for our suffering:

1. Here he quotes from Pro. 3:11, *“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord.”*

2. The word for *“regard lightly”* means to regard something as having little value, or regarding it as worthless. The KJV nails the meaning perfectly when it says, *“Do not despise the discipline of the Lord.”* In other words, do not hate the idea that God could have a part in your suffering, or hate God for causing it.

3. We may say to God or others *“Don’t tell me this trial is for my good and God’s glory. What possible good could come out of this? It’s just a worthless, act of undeserved suffering! There’s no point to it. There’s no explanation for it. It’s just meaningless, worthless suffering!”*

4. We see examples of this every time a natural disaster or act of terrorism occurs and the world’s spiritual leaders come out and say things like, *“God didn’t have anything to do with this.”* When Rabbi Kushner says, *“God would have done something about it if He could have, but even He can’t control it all,”* he’s teaching people to despise the discipline of the Lord. When Gregory Boyd and the Open Theists tell people: *“Don’t blame God for that trial in your life. He would have done something about it if He could have seen into the future, but even God can’t do that,”* he’s teaching people to despise the discipline of the Lord.

5. If we want to learn how to respond to trials in faith, we can look to men like Joseph, who, after being betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, falsely accused and unjustly imprisoned he could at the end of his life look his brothers in the eye and say, *“Do not be afraid... You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good”* (Gen 50:20).

6. The third unbiblical, unbelieving response to trial is to regard lightly, or despise the discipline of the Lord. The fourth unfaithful response is when...

IV. We faint under the weight of our suffering:

1. (v. 5) *“MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR*

FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM;

2. Perhaps when you experience suffering and trial you are not the type to shake your fist in God's face. But maybe you are the kind that simply collapses under the weight of it all.

3. When a trial comes, it just throws you into a blue funk and depression. It's not that you're angry, you're just incapacitated. You crush easily.

4. If you find this prospect resonating with your soul this morning, hear what God is saying to you. He is saying: You have not been given the luxury of allowing yourself to faint under trial. I have given you everything you need to stand firm, to persevere and to grow because of it. There are things I intend for you to learn. There are sins I want you to repent of. There are disciplines I want you to develop. Fainting is not an acceptable response.

5. We see an example of fainting in the life of Joshua (Josh. 7:7). Turn there and take a look. In Joshua 7 the story is told of when Israel attacked the little town of Ai and were soundly defeated. Joshua himself tells us what happened. Joshua 7:7 *"Joshua said, "Alas, O Lord GOD, why did You ever bring this people over the Jordan, only to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? If only we had been willing to dwell beyond the Jordan!"* ⁸ *"O Lord, what can I say since Israel has turned their back before their enemies?"* ⁹ *"For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear of it, and they will surround us and cut off our name from the earth. And what will You do for Your great name?"* ¹⁰

6. Do you hear the unbiblical, unfaithful tone of Joshua's cry? Yes, this was a terrible event, but the children of God are not permitted to faint in before suffering. God does not allow it. Notice what the Lord says... (v. 10): *"So the LORD said to Joshua, "Get up! Why is it that you have fallen on your face?"* ¹¹ *"Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. And they have even taken some of the things under the ban and have both stolen and deceived. Moreover, they have also put them among their own things."*

7. You see, beloved, God always has a reason for our trials. The discipline of the Lord is often the discipline of correction. Sometimes it's because we have sinned and God disciplines us to bring about repentance. Sometimes, however, God disciplines us for the purpose of prevention. Paul said the reason God gave him a thorn in the flesh was to keep him from becoming proud (2 Cor. 12:7). At other times, God disciplines us for the purpose of education. He simply wants us to grow deeper in our trust in him, our worship of Him, our dependence on Him, our knowledge of Him. Often the best venue for such an education is God's School of Suffering.

8. Its in God's school of suffering that he accomplishes it all; correction, prevention, and education. God is far less concerned about our temporary happiness than He is about our abiding holiness and joy.

9. So we see that sometimes we respond badly to trials by Over estimating the degree of our suffering, or by neglecting to bring God's word to bear on our suffering, or by making light of God's purpose for our suffering; by Fainting under the weight of our suffering; and finally, sometimes...

V. We Misinterpret God's attitude about our suffering:

1. v.5-6, *"MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; ⁶ FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES."*

2. When you are enduring under the next grievous trial, do not think for a moment, "God must be punishing me for my sin!" No! beloved. No. A thousand times, No! God is not punishing you! He will never do anything to exact payment for your sin. Bring the precious gospel of Jesus Christ to bear upon that moment and say with the prophet Isaiah, *Christ "was pierced for my transgressions. He was crushed for my iniquities; the chastisement for my well-being fell upon him, and by His stripes I am healed!"* Oh Father, thank you for this supreme mercy! "In my place, condemned He stood!"

3. "Because the sinless Savior died; my sinful soul is counted free! For God the Just is satisfied, to look on Him and pardon me. To look on Him and pardon me."

4. When I find myself under the next difficult trial, I pray that God would remind me that he never disciplines in anger. He never pours out wrath upon His children. He may be spanking me unto repentance. He may be disciplining me for the purpose of prevention. He may allow me to suffer as education for exaltation, but He will never punish me. Why? Because He has already punished Jesus in my place.

5. Old faithful Job once wrote: (Job 5:17) *"Behold, how happy is the man whom God reproves, So do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For He inflicts pain, and gives relief; He wounds, and His hands also heal."*

6. And the James, the brother of our Lord, said, (Jm. 1:12) *"Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him."*

7. As long as God's people live in this world, we will attend God's School of Suffering. May we learn our lessons well. For how we respond to difficulty, hardship and tragedy in this life demonstrates the true nature of our faith in the precious promises of God.