

Parenting Suffering Children, Part 1 | the nature of suffering

I. The Definition of Suffering

- According to Merriam-Webster, suffering is “*the state or experience of one that suffers,*” and to suffer is “*to submit to or be forced to endure.*”
- There are a number of Greek words we could dissect that are translated suffering, tribulation, distress, anguish, testing, trial, and the like . . . but I’m pretty sure we all have a working idea of what it means to suffer under, through, or in something.
- Still, we need to remind ourselves of one important fact: suffering is subjective. There is no universal definition of how heavy or painful and long-lasting something has to be in order to be described as suffering.
- Therefore, it’s important to approach this discussion with two mindsets:
 - A willingness to understand our children’s pain.
 - A commitment to help our children understand their own pain.

II. The Inevitability of Suffering

- In the New American Standard Bible, the word “suffer” is used 9 times in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And every single time it was used, it referenced Jesus’ suffering. Not only that, but each of those times was either an exact quote from Jesus Himself or the author was telling us that Jesus said He was going to have to suffer.
- If our Lord, the God of the universe in human flesh, suffered, who are we to think we can avoid it?
- In John 16:33 Jesus told His disciples, “*In the world you have tribulation.*”
- All Christians need to come to terms with the fact that suffering isn’t inevitable simply because we’re human, suffering will be compounded when we’re in Christ (Philippians 1:27-29).
- How can you shape your child’s theology when they get a splinter, stub their toe, or break an arm? How will you guide your children through teenage heartbreak? How do you plan to prepare your children for the death of friends or family members? Are you parenting your children in such a way that if they were ever diagnosed with cancer . . . they would understand what suffering is and how God wants to use it in their lives?

III. Suffering is Contagious

- The suffering of one member of the body of Christ should impact all those who are connected to him (I Corinthians 12:24-26; Galatians 6:1-2; James 5:13-20).
- The reality of suffering is one reason we need to teach our children Biblical empathy.
 - Merriam-Webster defines empathy as, “*the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner.*”
 - This may seem like a masochistic way of inviting *additional* suffering into our lives, but I would argue that it’s going to happen anyway. Suffering is contagious. Biblical empathy merely enables us to respond as Christ responds because we aren’t shutting ourselves off to their suffering, we’re experiencing it the *right way* and then helping them to do the same.
 - It’s akin to teaching someone to tie a knot. It’s generally not good enough to try to explain knot-tying. You have to get some rope and *show* them. You have to experience tying the knot in order to help the other person tie the knot successfully. Suffering is often the same. It’s easier to guide someone through their suffering as you walk through it with them.

IV. Christians suffer differently

- **Christians should never suffer because they're experiencing the consequences of their sin.**
 - I Peter 2:20, 3:17
 - There's a lot of suffering in the world. We'll suffer because we're mortal, frail humans. If we're Christians, we'll suffer for our righteousness. But we should never suffer because of our sin. That's not to say that we don't deserve consequences for our sin. We definitely do. However, we should be trying to follow Christ and escape the temptation to sin. Therefore, we should be inviting fewer and fewer consequences into our lives.
- **Christians suffer differently because they understand the purpose of suffering.**
 - I Peter 3:14
 - It's going to take some unpacking to understand how Peter could say that suffering is a blessed experience, but — for now — take courage. Holding on to this Truth — cleaving to it with your very life — will revolutionize your pain and anguish.
 - The suffering that seems the most unjust, the most out of place — *suffering because I did what is right* — is actually good. Peter just said that I can trust God in those moments (I Peter 4:19).
 - When we truly know understand, and believe this Truth, we'll look crazy to the world, but our suffering won't cause us shame (I Peter 4:16).
 - Suffering is a large concept that will inevitably crash into our lives sooner rather than later because it's inevitable and it's contagious. But Christians should suffer differently. We can suffer *well* because our suffering shouldn't come as a result of our sin and because we understand the purpose of our suffering. And part of that purpose is to glorify God.
- Therefore, **Christians suffer differently because they don't make their suffering about them.**
 - In the best of times and the worst of times humans are innately self-centered. Everything is about us.
 - We strive under the sun to achieve some level of comfort for *us*, why would we not take it as a personal affront when that comfort is stripped from us?
 - A cliché of the elderly is that they sit around all day discussing, comparing, and complaining about their ailments.
 - Psychiatrists and secular parenting "authorities" will tell us to embrace our children in their suffering, not truly from the perspective of rectifying or facing anything, but to simply experience their pain with them.
 - This inevitably turns the experience of the pain into the purpose of the pain, but could there be an any more hopeless outlook?
 - We don't suffer in order to be overwhelmed by it. We don't suffer in order to complain about it. We don't suffer so we can have a badge of honor or bragging rights. We definitely don't suffer simply to suffer.
 - Christians can suffer well in an entirely, God-focused way that gives Him all the honor and glory and blessing and worship and love that He deserves.