

Suffering and Life's Big Questions

Life's Most Important Questions

God's Word provides the answers to life's most vital questions. Who am I? Why am I here? Where did creation come from? What is the purpose of life? What is God's goal in creating us? How is man unique? Why is there suffering? What is death? Was creation always groaning? Can we know the future? Is there real hope? How can we be saved? Where can we find true love? All of these questions, and many others, are answered by God in His Word the Bible. In fact, only God's Word provides the answers to life's most essential questions. Let's look at some of the most important ones and then address suffering.

Who am I?

You are a person created in God's image. In the very first chapter of the Bible we are told "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:26-27). Humankind is the pinnacle of God's creation – unique from the rest of creation in many ways. We are conscious of life, self-aware, creative, we each have a conscience that reveals good and evil, we have a memory and can contemplate God's blessings and life's sufferings, we can learn and then teach, we have a concept of time (past, present, and future), we have emotions and are able to love or hate – laugh and cry, we have a free will and are able to choose good or evil, and we have eternally important choices to make...

What is the Purpose of Life?

God created mankind for His good pleasure – to know, love, serve, please and glorify God; to share in His glory and enjoy His perfect, loving presence forever! In the beginning, God and man walked in loving fellowship (Genesis 1-3). Sadly, man rebelled against His Maker. Soon, however, this communion will be eternally restored for those who turn back to the Lord (Revelation 21-22). Much of God's Word to mankind deals with this subject. Here are some Scriptures to look up regarding the purpose of life: Deuteronomy 10:12-13; 30:20; Psalm 16:11; 17:15; 83:18; 96:3; 133:3; 147:11; 150:6; Ecclesiastes 12:13-14; Isaiah 37:20; 43:7; 43:21; Micah 6:8; Matthew 5:13-16; 22:37-40; John 3:16-17; 8:31-32; 12:50; John 15; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 1:7-12; 2:10; 3:9-11; 1 John 3:2; Revelation 4:11.

The ultimate purpose of life is NOT to obtain an education, have a successful career, raise a family, store up the world's wealth, be popular or famous, control people, party or have a

“good time” for a few short years. In fact these are idols if you place them before knowing and serving God (Exodus 20). Jesus explained “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26-27). Though God is the giver of every good gift (family, food, friends, flowers, pets, color, music, joy, wisdom, etc.), our love for our Creator and Sustainer must take first place (Mark 12:30-31). Only a personal relationship with the God who is love can satisfy our deepest need (Psalm 17:15; 1 John 4:8).

What is God’s Goal in Creating Us?

God’s purpose is to win the hearts of mankind with whom He desires to spend eternity. “For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:3-4). “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). “For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all” (Romans 11:32). “As God has said: ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.’” (2 Corinthians 6:16).

“That you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life...” (Deuteronomy 30:20).

Was the Creation Always Groaning?

No. God created all things to be very good originally (Genesis 1). However, God gave man a free will and a choice (Genesis 2:16-17). Sadly, man rebelled. And as the Lord warned, sin resulted in death, decay, suffering and the curse (Genesis 3; Romans 8:18-23). However there is great news! Our Creator, Lord and Redeemer – Jesus Christ – will restore all things and there will be no more curse, suffering, sin or death! “And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him” (Revelation 22:3).

Can We Know the Future?

Yes. God’s Word lays out the future in great detail. The Bible is History – His story – revealed. The Bible provides many details explaining what the Lord has in store for those who love and obey Him, as well as the eternal fate of those who turn away and reject Him. Not surprisingly, the final book of the Bible (the Book of Revelation) culminates with many details of our future

destiny. The exciting news for believers is that every last days prophecy is lining up before our eyes today. At any moment, Jesus will rapture His church to heaven (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

Will Everyone Participate in God's Eternal New Heaven and New Earth?

Soon the Lord will "make all things new" (Revelation 21:5)! Though everyone is invited to God's eternal kingdom, only those who turn from sin (repent), and place their personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ will participate in God's glorious and everlasting kingdom. "And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely" (Revelation 22:17).

Is There a Coming Judgment?

Yes. There is both a glorious Heaven to seek and a terrible Hell (Lake of Fire) to shun. Scripture is very clear: "It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). Everything we have ever said, done, or even thought will be judged by the Lord. Jesus explained "But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment" (Matthew 12:36). Because God is perfectly righteous and we are all sinners, we cannot earn salvation by being good enough. The main purpose of God's commandments was to show us that God is holy and we are sinners who desperately need the Savior (Romans 3:19-20; Galatians 3:24).

Please compare yourself with the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), remembering that God sees lust as adultery and hatred as murder in the heart. Saying "o my god" is blasphemy and this is the third commandment – even before murder. The fact is "No one is good but One, that is, God" (Matthew 19:17).

The penalty for sin is death, but the good news is that "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Jesus suffered and died to pay for our sins, He then rose from the dead and freely offers to forgive and save all who place their faith in Him! "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31).

Why Are There Blessings and Trials?

The Lord gives us a taste of Heaven and Hell in this life: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19). The blessings are many: life, air, sunsets, stars, the fragrance and beauty of flowers, our thousands of taste buds and a variety of delicious foods, the gift of music and the ability to hear and appreciate inspiring

melodies, a close friendship, a loving parent, beloved children, a devoted pet, a warm hug, joy, hope, love, etc. “(God) did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17).

Truly, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning” (James 1:17). And while few people enjoy all these gifts, all enjoy some. Even on bad days we can use the gift of memory to reflect on God’s faithfulness. And even on the worst days He is still beating our heart, giving us air, and upholding our 100 trillion cells – each consisting of trillions of atoms and each more complicated than a city! King David, who went through many years of trials, could declare “Blessed be the Lord, who daily loads us with benefits, the God of our salvation!” (Psalm 68:19). And the Apostle Paul, who went through more suffering than most anyone (2 Corinthians 6:1-10; 11:16-33), affirmed that God “gives us richly all things to enjoy.” (1 Timothy 6:17).

Suffering?

For most people, this is the biggest question. If it is not your main dilemma then chances are you have not yet suffered chronically or deeply. But for those of us who have, we’ve each cried out countless times “Why God?”

At the onset of Job’s horrible sufferings he cried out to the Lord with a series of questions, “Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter of soul...” (Job 3:20). Job reached the point where he wanted to die: “My soul chooses strangling and death rather than my body” (Job 7:15). And Job is not the only biblical character who wanted his life of misery to end. Scripture records at least seven who reached the breaking point: Job (Job 3:1-13); Elijah (1 Kings 19:4); Moses (Numbers 11:14-15); David (Psalms); Jonah (Jonah 4:3-8); Jeremiah (Jeremiah 20:14-18); Paul (2 Corinthians 1:8).

Many of you can relate. Interestingly, the Book of Job is likely the oldest book in the Bible – perhaps over four thousand years old. Of course God knew that those He created in His image would yearn to understand why He allows such awful tribulations. Therefore, much of God’s Word addresses the question of suffering. In fact the Bible is the only book that explains the origin and solution to the curse, death and suffering.

Will Every Person Suffer?

Jesus said, “Everyone will be seasoned with fire” (Mark 9:49). Apparently, everyone will suffer some trials during this short life. And tragically those who harden their heart to the Lord will suffer “the vengeance of eternal fire” (Jude 7).

Jesus relates the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The “rich man...was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate” (Luke 16:19-20). The rich man did not have trials like other men and sadly he never repented of his sins (Luke 16:30). In his lifetime the rich man received his good things, but he ultimately ended up in fire (Luke 16:24). Lazarus, on the other hand, is a picture of those who trust the Lord. He groaned in this life, but is forever comforted.

As Paul writes concerning believers, “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable (miserable)” (1 Corinthians 15:19). There is no hope apart from eternal life in Jesus Christ. Paul continues, “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:20). The resurrection and gift of eternal life by faith in Christ is our one true hope!

Benefits to Suffering

Most of us can appreciate the benefit of a certain amount of trials and suffering. Laboring to complete a difficult task, studying diligently to master a subject, being consistently disciplined for children, grueling training for an athlete, etc., can all build character and be very satisfying when completed with integrity.

In addition to character building there are other benefits to suffering. Before I was saved, it was suffering in part that made me consider the vanity of this life, my mortality and accountability to God. The Scriptures provide many examples of how trials can turn believers back to God and turn the lost to trust the Lord:

“Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word... It is good for me that I have been afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes” (Psalm 119:67, 71).

“Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and He delivered them out of their distresses” (Psalm 107:6).

“Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me” (Psalm 50:15).

“I will return again to My place Till they acknowledge their offense. Then they will seek My face; In their affliction they will earnestly seek Me” (Hosea 5:15).

“And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: ‘My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives.’ If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we

paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live?" (Hebrews 12:5-9).

"Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God" (1 Peter 4:1-2).

Suffering can help us see our mortality, frailty and sin – and clearly reveal our desperate need for our Sustainer to carry and save us.

Comforting and Loving Others

The afflicted can also best comfort the afflicted. If you are a believer with a chronic illness you will be more patient and helpful to those who are sick. If you experience loneliness, you will likely provide more comfort and listening care to orphans, widows and others who are lonely. If you experience ridicule or resistance for your faith, you will be a greater encourager to those who experience persecution.

We are more able to sympathize, comfort and assist those experiencing similar trials – because we know what it's like. The Bible explains it this way:

"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" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

Fellowship of Sufferings

Suffering also can lead to a closer bond of love. Isn't it true we are closest with those we can cry with? Aren't the most intimate friendships forged with those we share hardships with?

Paul wrote to beloved Timothy: "Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God" (2 Timothy 1:8).

Ultimately, for those who trust the Lord, suffering should result in a deeper communion and a more meaningful love relationship with our Savior and others. "That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death" (Philippians 3:10).

The Lord is Closest to the Broken

Jesus carried all our pain, sicknesses and sorrows on the cross as well as paying for our sins (Isaiah 53). And the Holy Spirit groans with us and intercedes for us until we are home (Romans 8:26-34). Our Lord is with every broken believer, and He “will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom” (Matthew 26:29). In other words, Jesus is with us in our trials until our homecoming celebration (Matthew 25:40; Acts 9:4). “Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25).

“The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit” (Psalm 34:18).

“The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18).

“O you afflicted one, Tossed with tempest, and not comforted, Behold, I will lay your stones with colorful gems, And lay your foundations with sapphires” (Isaiah 54:11).

God is not only with us in our affliction, but His Word assures us that any suffering we endure as believers will result in an eternal reward: “For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear is in me” (Philippians 1:29-30). We are saved by God's grace (a free, unmerited gift based on faith in Jesus' death and resurrection) and also granted (literally graced) to suffer for Christ's sake.

Tribulations Confirm We are in God's Will

Many times when I've been up at night and groaning I've prayed something like this: “Lord I do not like this suffering, but I would rather be with You in suffering than apart from You in comfort.”

The truth is “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Timothy 3:12). “(Believers) must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). “Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the LORD delivers him out of them all” (Psalm 34:19).

Trials are actually a confirmation that God is using us. If you are in the Word and reaching out with the Gospel, you will experience trials. And especially if you are on the front lines praying, serving, and sharing the Word, you will be a target. Even so, “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven” (Matthew 5:12).

One Purpose of Suffering

Here is an illustration that might help us understand in part another benefit and purpose in suffering.

Suppose Adam and Eve were still in the Garden of Eden before the fall. They still lived in ideal conditions and in perfect fellowship with God. One day people from our fallen world were allowed to enter their paradise. When these people step into paradise and meet Adam and Eve, they begin to cry with wonder, "It's wonderful here – everything is so beautiful!" To which Adam replies, "Yes, we like it."

"No, you don't understand, this place shines with delights beyond description, you have pure love with God and one another, there's no pain or sickness, just fullness of joy!" To which Eve replies, "Yes, we agree, it's nice here." The visitors persist, "You don't understand, there is no loneliness, no hunger, no misery at all, only a river of holy pleasures and indescribable communion with God and harmony with creation." To which Adam and Eve inquire: "What is loneliness and hunger? What does misery mean?"

You see without a reference to compare to, Adam and Eve could not comprehend how wonderful their paradise was. Only those who have suffered can fully appreciate Heaven. A person who was lonely much of their earthy life will more appreciate the perfect heavenly family than someone who had many friends. A chronically ill person will more fully appreciate their new, glorious, immortal bodies than a person who had relatively good health during this life.

In the oldest Psalm Moses prays, "Make us glad according to the days in which You have afflicted us, The years in which we have seen evil" (Psalm 90:15). Everyone in heaven will be full and satisfied, but our depth and capacity to fathom the blessings may correspond to the degree we suffered.

Senseless Suffering?

When suffering strikes severe or long, we all tend to cry out "This makes no sense!" When we see a child starving or an elderly person dying in slow misery or a believer persecuted or someone with a chronic illness, it seems so senseless at times.

How could a God of love allow this? Even Jesus – the eternal Son of God and yet fully man – cried out on the cross "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mark 15:34). Even Jesus asked why.

Though this question is beyond our comprehension to fully understand in this life (Romans 11:33), the solution seems to reside in the nature of God and the fact that His love demands a choice. God is love and love demands choice (1 John 4:8). Love requires free will. Forced love is not true love. In making mankind in His image, God gave us free will. Choice is found in nearly every section of Scripture. Of course, the gift of volition necessitates a viable option. So God offers His righteous way (and pleads with us to trust Him), or we may choose Satan's sinful ways. And the Bible acknowledges that sin is pleasurable for a short season (Hebrews 11:25; James 5:5) – therefore it is a real and attractive option to our sinful flesh.

To choose God, or turn away from Him and follow our own selfish ways (pride, lust, greed, idolatry) is the choice set before each of us. And because all have sinned and gone astray, the resultant suffering is everywhere.

Certainly God could have created us and forced His will on us and avoided all the suffering – both to us and Himself (remember the Lord suffered more than all and for all – 1 John 2:2). But then He would have created robots – not humans who could freely receive and respond to His love forever.

God's offered Himself – the greatest gift of love – to suffer and die to reconcile us: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19); "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (John 15:13). This marriage proposal means that we are not automatons, but have a real choice. Love demands free will. Those who receive Jesus as Lord and Savior will forever be grateful for God's good plan and purpose.

And remember that suffering is only temporary for those who turn back to the Lord. So from the eternal perspective "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

God Will Eternally Bless His Afflicted Children

Many times I've cried out: "Lord this is too much!" To be honest, I'm struggling as I write this because I do not understand why some people experience so many deep trials. However, there are many passages that explain that the eternal blessings that believers will receive from the Lord will correspond to their trials of faith in this life:

"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" (1 Peter 4:13).

"He who continually goes forth weeping, Bearing seed for sowing, Shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, Bringing his sheaves with him" (Psalm 126:6).

“To console those who mourn in Zion, To give them beauty for ashes, The oil of joy for mourning, The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; That they may be called trees of righteousness, The planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified” (Isaiah 61:3).

“Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4).

“Blessed are you who hunger now, For you shall be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, For you shall laugh” (Luke 6:21).

“Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy” (John 16:20).

“And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation” (2 Corinthians 1:7)

“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” (Romans 8:16-18).

“They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 7:16-17).

Righting All Wrongs

Eternity will be the great equalizer when God will implement His righteous judgment. Scripture explains that the poor of this world are rich in faith (James 2:5). Those who sow in tears (now) shall reap in joy (in the future) (Psalm 126:5). Those who mourn now shall be comforted (forever in heaven), and those who are meek in this life shall inherit the earth and delight themselves in the abundance of peace (Matthew 5:3-6; Psalm 37:11).

From God’s eternal perspective “More are the children of the desolate than the children of the married woman” (Isaiah 54:1). And believers’ current afflictions are working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory (2 Corinthians 4:17). Those who are weak in the Lord are seen as strong forevermore (2 Corinthians 12:10). And Jesus said “The last will be first” (Matthew 20:16) and “he who is least among you all will be great” (Luke 9:48). You see, God’s way is often directly opposite to the world’s way.

So if you’re following the King, yet feel least and last; weak and battered down; or if you’re mocked or scorned for following the Lord; then “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven” (Matthew 5:12; see also Luke 16:25).

The Origin and Solution to Suffering

Ironically, the existence of suffering and decay is actually evidence for the inspiration of the Bible because only the Bible explains the origin of sin, suffering and death. God's Word tells us that the whole creation is groaning under the curse because of mankind's rebellion against his Creator. No other book makes clear the origin of suffering.

Furthermore God is not removed from or indifferent to our suffering. He groans with us (Romans 8:26). In fact, the Creator became a man to suffer and die for the sins of the world so that we might be redeemed from the curse of sin and death. Isaiah 53 tells us that "He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows...He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:4-5). Jesus actually bore the full weight of every person's sins, sicknesses, sufferings (Psalm 22). He alone suffered and died in our place – and then rose victorious. He alone qualifies to redeem and restore all things.

Finally, for those who trust the Lord, there is the wonderful promise of an eternity in Heaven where there will be no more suffering or trials. Until then, He who loved us and died for us, promises to be with us always (Matthew 28:20).

So, while the Bible does not give us a full understanding of suffering, it is the only source that explains the origin of suffering, provides the only solution for suffering, and promises that the Creator will work all these things together for good, for those who love God (Romans 8:28).

Only the God of the Bible Shares in our Groaning

No other religious leader, guru, or so-called god is with us in our trials. There is only one true God and He is omnipresent. The Lord promises, "Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the LORD your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:6).

Only the biblical God is a personal God who is near the broken hearted. Only He bore the sin and suffering of the world (Isaiah 53). Jesus Christ is the only Savior (Acts 4:12). The Lord is currently interceding for us and groaning for us (Hebrews 7:25). "Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Romans 8:26).

Only the Word of God assures us that "In all their affliction He was afflicted, And the Angel of His Presence saved them; In His love and in His pity He redeemed them; And He bore them and carried them All the days of old" (Isaiah 63:9).

“For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

Christ suffered more than all. He knows what you are going through. The Lord is travailing with you and promises to carry you home.

Paul’s Example

The Apostle Paul went through tremendous sufferings. He was “burdened beyond measure, above strength,” (2 Corinthians 1:8) even despairing of life. Paul lists some of his sufferings in 2 Corinthians: “in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness-- besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches” (2 Corinthians 11:23-28).

Yet through all this, Paul could triumphantly declare: “Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (Romans 8:37). Paul had the eternal perspective. May the Lord help each of us maintain an eternal perspective and trust in His righteousness, personal care and eternal love.

God’s Character

During times of suffering I’ve thought in my heart “Lord, how I feel does not change who You are.” I know God’s Word is true and over and over again God assures us that He alone is holy and righteous. He is good, merciful and loving. God has a reason for everything He does or allows: ““And they will comfort you, when you see their ways and their doings; and you shall know that I have done nothing without cause that I have done in it,’ says the Lord GOD” (Ezekiel 14:23).

Though we are told “His ways [are] past finding out” – at least in this life (Romans 11:33), we can be assured that “He will do no unrighteousness. Every morning He brings His justice to light; He never fails” (Zephaniah 3:5), and His mercies “are new every morning” (Lamentations 3:23).

We know from God’s Word that He is sovereign, all wise, all holy, all gracious and all loving. Creation also testifies that God is all wise and all powerful. The heavens declare His glory, and the wonders of creation testify to His eternal power, wisdom and provision.

And we know from conscience that God is moral and upright. The reason we are concerned when an atrocity is committed is because God's moral law – written on our hearts – shows us it is wrong (Romans 2:14-15). In other words, we would not even know right from wrong unless our moral Maker revealed it to us (John 1:9).

Most significantly, we know from Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross that God is loving, gracious and compassionate. God has demonstrated His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

So while God has not given us all the answers, we can trust Him with complete confidence knowing that He will always do what is right (Genesis 18:25).

Advice for Sufferers

Read or listen to the Bible daily. God will speak encouragement and guidance to your heart. Pray regularly and pray for others – especially others who suffer. If you're able, reach out and minister to others who are suffering. I have found that as I minister to the hurting and share with the lost, my eyes get on the Lord and His harvest and off my own troubles. If you can't get out, then pray. Interceding for others is a powerful ministry that avails much (James 5:16).

Above all "in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Go through your abc's of blessings. For each letter thank God for: apples, the color blue, Christ's atonement, deliverance from all evil, etc. Thank Him daily – He has promised you eternal life! As you praise and worship God, bitterness will often give way to rest and hope.

Advice for Care Givers

Be quick to listen and slow to speak (James 1:19). Those who are sick and weak cry out to God regularly, but they also need to vent to a friend (Proverbs 17:17). Pray together, sing praise songs together and share Scriptures and praise reports. Help with practical needs – prepare meals, pick up groceries, offer to clean, etc. In these last days, comforters and helpers will be needed. And remember, when you are ministering to anyone, you are ministering to Jesus – "Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: 'for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; 'I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in? ...And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me'" (Matthew 25:34-40).

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to recommend three Psalms for comfort and encouragement: Psalm 23, Psalm 90 and Psalm 103. Below is a personal word of encouragement from Wintley Phipps; a poem written by Francis Ridley Havergal; two poems I wrote in the midst of deep personal suffering; and the lyrics to the song *Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus*. May the Lord grant you great grace and everlasting mercy and carry you home with peace and joy.

Personal Word of Encouragement from Wintley Phipps

Before singing "It is well with my soul" on YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYFjikyp7mQ>

It is in the quiet crucible of your personal private sufferings that your noblest dreams are born and God's greatest gifts are given in compensation for what you've been through.

Light after darkness by Francis Ridley Havergal

Light after darkness, gain after loss,
Strength after suffering, crown after cross.
Sweet after bitter, song after sigh,
Home after wandering, praise after cry.

Sheaves after sowing, sun after rain,
Sight after mystery, peace after pain.
Joy after sorrow, calm after blast,
Rest after weariness, sweet rest at last.

Near after distant, gleam after gloom,
Love after loneliness, life after tomb.
After long agony, rapture of bliss!
Right was the pathway leading to this!

I am a worm

I am a worm, helpless and weak. My body is weary and my eye dim. My hope wanes and bitterness gurgles out of me. My flesh would curse God and die, yet my soul knows no other hope. I am surrounded by fears, fears of Him forsaking me or me forsaking Him. Help me Lord! Do not delay! You are truth and power - I am dust. You are light and wisdom - I am fading and foolish. I do not know myself.

How can I reason with the Almighty? Yet, why when I try to draw close to You and turn others to You do you afflict me? You've promised rest, You've promised hope. I stand still and find none. I strive and am only wounded more deeply. I seek You in Your Word and cry out to Heaven day and night. When will you grant me sweet sleep? When will you say to my bowels - quiet? If You say the word, I am healed. If you give the command I will prosper. Why have you allotted so many days, weeks, months of futility? Have I drawn closer to You or become bitter? My mind and heart are like the sea, full of confusion and disorder.

You sent Your Son to die for me. You sent Your Spirit to comfort me. And when I said yes to Jesus and kissed the Son I found peace and hope. As I sought to understand deep mysteries my mind broke and confusion entered. Who can understand the Most High? Who can explain His ways? Why, if You take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, do You make the path of life so difficult? Yet salvation is free and Your burden is easy, but discipleship will cost your life, though it be for our own profit. I've heard about You, but do I know You? I know not myself, yet You know me.

You are and there is no other. You hold the atoms together by Your great strength. You divide and direct each cell in the womb. You breathe and new life is created. Please renew, refresh and heal Your Body. Please pour out Your grace beyond measure. Please turn sinners to Life and Truth. Oh, that I might be with You today, where there is fullness of joy, where pain and sorrow are forever gone. Then I will understand. Then I will know You!

I say to You I cannot go another day. I beg you to restore my joy and hope that I might proclaim Your goodness. Will today be the day!? Yet You tarry. My soul rolls and is dizzy. My stomach churns and hates food and medicine. Jesus, HELP! Be moved with compassion! Pour Your loving kindness on me and my friends. You alone understand. Hasten to deliver us. Come quickly! Help Laura, Barb, Karen, Dan, Adele, Richard, Anne and so many more. Bless those who plead for Your mercy and show compassion. Turn those who are hardened and hopeless to life. Do not forsake the work of Your hands. You are light and in You is no darkness. You think no evil nor do

You rejoice in destruction. Even now my tears flow, cramps oppress me, and I am weary. Bring help and wait no longer!

Who can share in another's sorrow? Who can comfort fully the downcast? Only you Lord. Those at ease forget disaster. Those in comfort can provide no comfort. Only those who are afflicted can help the afflicted. Father, through the Son and the Spirit You groan and travail with us. Why must it be? Heal us and You also will cease from groaning. When I was in darkness I feared another's torment, but now Your love compels me to help. Help me to walk in the Spirit that my flesh would not torture me.

Lord, add to Your kingdom. Remember that the dead cannot praise you. I say to my mouth - be quiet, you fool! Yet, hours of tossing and pacing cause me to cry out. When I collapse but an hour, You scare me with dreams. When sleep and hope come for a moment, they are quickly stolen. I have praised You night and morn, yet my heart faints. Is my praise pure? My flesh and the enemy say NO! Yet only You can tell.

Surely You will not destroy a bruised reed or snuff out a dim wick. When I'm in Heaven, who will I be? My soul will be established. Earthly wealth is vanity, lust is never satisfied, sin is pleasurable only for a season. Where can we go? Only You have the words of eternal life. Surely Your Word is true, yet the natural man cannot understand. Renew my mind, refresh my spirit, grant me understanding. Have I gone this long without understanding? Have I grown in grace or has my complaining condemned me? Only my Redeemer knows. He promises the wicked one cannot touch me. Why do I feel polluted?

Wash me, Lord, and I will be clean. Only You do I fear. You are a terror to me. I will not speak of the enemy for You alone are in control. Your grace has taught my heart to fear - by grace relieve my fears and fill me with love. Oh that I might bless those who have comforted me. Bless me, that I may bless others. Heal me, that I may encourage the sick. Oh, that my cup of blessings may run over on many!

Forty months of Torment

Forty months of torment, who can weigh the pain?
Sleeplessness and sighing, like the dreary rain.

He does hold my head up – though I long to die.
How I thirst for Heaven – the sweet bye and bye.

Why have You forsaken me – silent to my cry?
Yet I know You're near Lord – Sustainer please arise.

Soon this life is over – never more to roam.
Joy and peace and wholeness – when Jesus takes us home!

Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus

O soul, are you weary and troubled?
No light in the darkness you see?
There's light for a look at the Savior,
And life more abundant and free!

Refrain:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.

Through death into life everlasting
He passed, and we follow Him there;
O'er us sin no more hath dominion—
For more than conqu'rors we are!

His Word shall not fail you—He promised;
Believe Him, and all will be well:
Then go to a world that is dying,
His perfect salvation to tell!