

SUFFERING CHRISTIANS

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For many people, life is difficult. Many people are suffering physically and/or emotionally. They are lonely and bored or bitter or depressed or enduring deep sorrow or chronic pain, etc. For Christians, this should not be surprising to us. The Bible tells us that when God finished His creation on the sixth day, all was very good. But now, thanks to the sin of mankind, we are living in a fallen world – full of disease, disorders, decay and death. Therefore we have to suffer the consequences of sin (some people much more than others). The Bible does not promise peace on earth this side of the grave (although it does promise no more tears, sorrow or suffering in the heavenly kingdom to come). It says that we may have to endure suffering and persecution.

So how should you respond to suffering? No matter what happens, life goes on until you die. You have to continue living, so you have to decide how you want to live during this time of suffering. The quality of your life may not be what you would want, but the quality of the rest of your life is up to how you decide to live it. Either you can be bitter and complain about your circumstances or you can make the best of it. If you had a choice of being happy and content versus bitter and unsatisfied with your life, which would you choose?

Throughout my life I have seen many people suffering for a variety of reasons. From those who have lost a physical ability or their independence, or were enduring chronic physical pain, to those who have lost loved ones or who have made a serious mistake. But it is amazing to see how the quality of their life was affected by their attitude toward their situation. Whether they were angry or bitter or full of self-pity or they were joyful, content and full of hope, depended on their focus. Were they focused on themselves and their situation or on God and other people?

Over the years I have also noticed that the people who are most miserable are those who are mostly concerned about themselves (their problems, what they don't have, what others have done to them, etc.). In contrast, those who appear to be content in their life and full of joy are those who love God and enjoy doing things for others. The people who most encourage me are those who are disabled (visually and/or physically handicapped) but talk about how blessed they are to be able to do what they can still do. If you stop and think about it, there are many things to be thankful for even if you are suffering. Do you still have the ability to sufficiently see, read, hear, breathe, walk, talk, or think? Are you blessed with the gifts of friends, family, food and a home?

Ephesians 2:10 states: "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (NIV). This passage indicates that we were all created by God to do good works. God has a plan for us to do things for others, no matter what our situation may be. Often I have seen that because of the disability of a person and because of their attitude to overcome or over look their disability, they are more effective at reaching and encouraging others. What a testimony it is to weak believers and non-believers for them to see a person who is suffering but still loves and praises God for their blessings and their hope in their eternal future.

In 2 Corinthians 1:3-11, it discusses the sufferings of Christians and the comfort they receive from God. (Some of the following comments about this Scripture come from "The MacArthur Study Bible") Verse 4 states that God "comforts us in all our tribulation (so) that we may be able to comfort those who are in trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." The Greek word for "comfort" here means "one who comes alongside to help" (for Christians, this would be the Holy Spirit – our comforter). The word "comfort" also means "to give strength, courage and boldness." Comfort from God is not an end in itself. Its purpose is that believers also might be comforters to others. Therefore God, in the middle of our sufferings and troubles, comforts us – strengthens us and gives us courage to endure our hardships – so that we may in turn comfort others in need.

I have also learned that it is important for people to feel needed and to have a purpose in life. So if you want to have joy in your life, ask God for comfort and to use you and guide you to fulfill His plan for you. Then evaluate your God-given talents and gifts and the needs of others around you. See what you can do to encourage others (especially in spiritual things), to make them happier, to make their life more enjoyable and worth living. Then see how God blesses you!