

# Suffering

by Howard Norrish

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*Suffering is a necessary part of life that can bring us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, teach us obedience, maturity, and empathy, and bring us closer to God.*

**Duration:** 37:49

**Scripture:** Genesis 22:12, Hosea 3:1, Matthew 6:33, Hebrews 2:10

**Topics:** "Suffering And Obedience", "Faith And Perseverance"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares two stories of teams spreading the word of God in challenging circumstances. One team went to a town in Sudan and faced immediate arrest, but were eventually allowed to sell literature and share the Jesus film. The other team faced the test of obedience, similar to Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac in the Bible. The speaker emphasizes that obedience to God's will often involves suffering, but it ultimately leads to blessings. The sermon concludes with a story of a community in Sudan turning from Islam to Christianity in just two weeks, after being influenced by previous relief and development work done by Christian organizations.

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## Transcript

A fellow in South Yemen, in response to a radio broadcast from FIBA coming out from the Seychelles. And this fellow said that he was a regular listener to one of their early morning broadcasts and every morning he listened to it before he had to rush off to school. And he had clearly come to a saving knowledge of the Lord as a result, really, of listening to these broadcasts.

Then he wrote in the letter that he was really sad because his radio broke and he could no longer listen. So he started to go to school a little earlier than he had normally been going. And then to his astonishment, every house that he passed had the program on so loudly that he could listen.

And he was rejoicing that as he went to school he could hear the whole of the program because every house in his little town had it on. And he got the whole thing. That is in a country where there is no known church at all.

Just another little story from one of our teams this summer. In May, we sent a team to a town called Damazine in Sudan. There were only 13 of them and they were led by a Sudanese brother called Abraham.

And they arrived and within hours they were arrested and held for about six hours. Then they were allowed to go and sell literature and speak to the people, show the Jesus film. And there was an amazing response.

Within a day, many, many people came and said, please teach us about Christianity. Somebody gave them a piece of land. And in the two weeks, they erected a church, not exactly like this, but with grass roof, open wall sides.

And from morning till night, they taught the people the word of God. Many, many came through a real knowledge of the Lord, but in fact it was a sort of a community turning from Islam to the Lord. Quite amazing.

And that was all in a two-week period. There is a story behind it. About two years ago, World Vision and ACROSS were working in this same area, in relief and development work.

Two years ago, they got thrown out and they got replaced by Islamic groups coming in to do relief and development work. And the people saw the difference. And they didn't like what they saw.

And so when Christians came back into the area, they more or less said, we want to follow the Lord. Teach us everything you can about the Lord Jesus. And so, how easy is it to plant a Muslim convert church? Does it take years and years and years? This actually beats the Apostle Paul.

He spent three weeks in Thessaloniki and planted a church. This was done in two weeks. Quite staggering.

But that is the spirit of God on the move. If you wonder what's happened about follow-up, Sudan Interior Mission sent one of their Sudanese evangelists down there to keep things going. But we are seeing, increasing these amazing stories of the spirit of God working.

And I sense, I think many of us sense that before 1999, the spiritual situation in the Arab world is going to be radically different from it is now. But this isn't inevitable. And I think what the spirit of God seems to be saying to many of us is that it will come if we're prepared to suffer.

I'd just like to give you a sort of a brief comparison between Jesus and Muhammad. Now technically, this isn't fair or legitimate. Muslims believe that Muhammad was only a prophet, whereas we believe that Jesus was the son of God.

And yet, to many Muslims, they look on Muhammad as the one who is the Lord of their lives. He is the source of their law and their theology, of the Sunnah. And increasingly, Muhammad's position is being raised to that of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I often see in an Islamic book the 99 names of God on the front cover and the 99 names of Muhammad on the back cover. Many of the names are the same. I was very intrigued to see a book recently written by a fellow called Faisal Ahmed called Meet the Master, a Life Sketch of Muhammad the Savior, clearly a title taken from Peter Marshall's book, you know, Mr. Jones, Meet the Master.

And the birth of Muhammad is becoming increasingly important and celebrated very much like Christmas. So there are similarities between the way that Muslims look at Muhammad and we look at the Lord Jesus. And there's a comparison in a sense their message and their approach.

They both began to preach a message of repentance. Jesus came with, repent for the kingdom of God is at hand. Muhammad came with a message, repent for the judgment of God is coming.

And both of them had a similar reaction to their message. Jesus wasn't received in his hometown, Nazareth. And Muhammad wasn't received in his hometown, Mecca.

Both of them were welcomed by the poor, but it was the religious hierarchy that persecuted them and attacked them over and over again. But I want you to see the profound difference in the reaction that they had to persecution and to suffering. Because Muhammad chose to rule rather than suffer.

And there was the famous flight and he went up to Medina and he became a worldly, earthly ruler, leading his armies into battle. Whereas Jesus, in response to persecution, chose to suffer rather than to rule. If you like, Muhammad chose to be the messiah that the Jews expected their messiah to be, a conquering, earthly ruler, leading his people.

Whereas Jesus, although he was the messiah, rejected that job description completely and chose to suffer. And wherever Christians have chosen to suffer, there has been a release of power and life in the spirit of God. But whenever Christians have chosen, if you like, to go the road of Muhammad, there has been disaster.

Perhaps the classic example would be the Crusades. I think what the spirit of God is at least saying to us is that if you really want to see the breakthroughs, then you're going to have to learn something about suffering. And it is suffering that brings us into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Hebrews has a phrase that Christ went through the school of suffering. And if you go into a pottery works, very often before they put the vase or piece of pottery into the furnace, they paint it with black. And the more valuable or more beautiful the vase or plate is, the greater the thickness of the blackness that the potter puts on.

And you might wonder, why are you putting so much black on the plates? If you took it out of the furnace, you'll see what was black has turned to gold. And I think as we experience suffering, the furnace of that turns what God apparently is black into gold in our lives. And I want to share with you some of the thoughts of why Christ suffered during this time.

Four aspects of the suffering of Christ, which are emphasized in the book of Hebrews. Remember, Thomas said about the Lord Jesus, unless I see in his hands the imprint of the nails and put my finger into the place of the nails, I will not believe. And it seems over and over again, the world says to us, unless I see the marks of the nails, I will not receive.

Now, suffering comes in many forms. There's physical suffering, pain experienced in the body. Just a little while ago, I was with my daughter Sharon in hospital.

And there, my wife and I sort of held our hands while she was contorted with pain. They had injected her with a painkiller and she was allergic to it. She stopped breathing.

So they had to put in an antidote to get her breathing again. But that dramatically increased the pain. And she couldn't help but cry out over and over again, squeezing our hands.

There was nothing we could do except sort of weep alongside her as she went through excruciating agony. And I thought, thank God there is a day coming when there's going to be no more pain. But then there's emotional suffering.

Often it's worse. Mental torture. And often we experience something of this.

An erring son or daughter that's gone away from the Lord. Some circumstance that is almost pure hell in the agony that it causes. Then there's spiritual suffering.

Suffering. That's what the Lord experienced. And so it's going to be for us as we enter the same school that he went through.

Suffering is a prerequisite to spiritual power and authority. And if we're going to bear the likeness of the Lord Jesus, we must follow where he went. Now, suffering comes in various sources, from various sources.

It comes as a discipline of the father. You know Hebrews 12 very well. Those who he loves, he disciplines.

I read this of someone rather nicely put. Someone wrote, he was brought up at the knee of a dedicated mother and across the knee of a devoted father. C.S. Lewis writes, pain plants the flag of truth in the mind.

And in many cases the only way that we're going to learn a certain truth is when it's accompanied by pain. It's not a denial of love. It's an evidence that the father loves us.

And each of us has to submit ourselves to the disciplines of the father. That he asks us to go through for his own purposes. Then there's suffering that comes from the world.

Peter speaks of suffering for righteousness sake. Our Lord Jesus warned us, the world will hate you as it hated me. He went on to say, if you were of the world, you would be loved by the world.

But then he says, I have chosen you out of the world and therefore the world will hate you. Then there's a suffering that comes from ourselves. Jesus said, if your eye offends you, pluck it out.

And there is a self-imposed desirable discipline that is often hurtful that we must learn to exercise. And then there's, I think, suffering that comes straight from Satan. He is a destroyer.

He hates all people because all people are made in the image of God. But he especially hates us who are believers in Jesus Christ because we're born again by the spirit of God. And there is a deep hatred of us and he will constantly come and try and destroy us.

And destroy that which we love. Now there is a suffering that is common to all humanity and believers are not exempt from this. We are not triumphalists and we shouldn't hesitate to accept suffering.

But I want you to see that there is in God's school of suffering a purpose behind it. Jesus learned to suffer and we can learn how to turn, as it were, those black periods of our lives into gold in the furnace of suffering. Paul cried out that he longed to know the fellowship of Christ's sufferings.

In another place he says, I bear in my body the marks of the sufferings of Christ. In Colossians he talks about filling up in his own body the sufferings of Christ. Now what are these four points? The first one is found in Hebrews 5, 8, which says, although he was a son, he learned obedience from the things that he

suffered.

J.B. Phillips writes, he had to prove the meaning of obedience. Or the New English Bible writes, he learned obedience in the school of suffering. And I think the first principle why Christ suffers and why we suffer is that we would learn that obedience, that costs nothing, proves nothing.

And to prove the obedience of your faith, the Father requires you very, very often to give something that's costly, beyond all telling. The school of suffering tests and proves our obedience. And this is so often why the Lord leads us into this, through this school.

It says of Jesus, he was obedient unto death, even the death on the cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and given him a name which is above every name. Why? Because he was obedient.

Now the classic example of this is the testing of Abraham's obedience in Genesis 22. God's revelation to Abraham was very clear. Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of the Lord and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I will tell you.

The will of God to Abraham was crystal clear and God's revelation to Abraham was costly. His only son to be offered up to God. God's response to the will of God was swift.

It says that, so Abraham rose early in the morning and started his journey. But it wasn't only swift, it was sustained. Three days of travel, the agony of building an altar and laying the wood on the altar and then tying up his son, laying him on there and then taking up the knife.

It was a sustained obedience to the will and the call of God. And it was only then, at that last moment, that God saw that he was obedient and intervened. Verse 12 of that chapter, now I know, God says, that you fear God.

And then in verse 16, because you have done this thing, I will not withhold and not withhold your only son. Indeed, I will greatly bless you and I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven and the sands on the seashore and your seed will overcome all the enemies and all nations will be blessed through you. Blessing came as a result of obedience.

And therefore, suffering proves a loyalty to our Lord Jesus Christ. A loyalty that can only be proved through suffering. It's a profound lesson to learn that a less obedience that costs nothing proves nothing.

Think of the little story that frequently happens in our house of a mother calling her child to supper. And she calls up upstairs saying, Supper's ready. And the child says, I'm coming.

And then nothing happens. So two or three minutes later, the mother says, Supper's ready. And the child says, I'm coming, I'm coming.

And no one comes. And so finally, the mother says, Supper's ready. And the child says, I'm coming.

And mother says, Stop coming and come. And that's so often what the Lord says of us. We said, we're ready, Lord.

We're ready. We're going to come. But do we really come? Remember Mary's words.

Whatever he says to you, do it. A loyalty that can only be proved in the school of suffering. Therefore, do not be surprised when the will of God for you is costly.

God wants you to demonstrate to the world and to the principalities and powers, your love and your obedience to him. And it's a privilege to suffer if it glorifies him. The second principle I find in the book of Hebrews is found in Hebrews 2.10. For it was fitting for him for whom are all things and through whom are all things in bringing many sons to glory to perfect the author of their salvation through suffering.

Or as another version has it, he was made perfect through suffering. Or perhaps better than perfect, he was made complete through suffering. Now this word completion has the concept of maturity.

Now the book of, the author of the book of Hebrews is not implying that there was anything imperfect about the Lord Jesus. There is no imperfection in him that needs to be rectified. But there was a need for completion.

Jesus was lacking in experience as a man, and that experience could only be gained through suffering. As an ordinary human being, God in a sense had to learn to suffer. And there is an understanding that only comes through suffering.

And as God had to learn through suffering, we who go through the same school of suffering have to learn something of the compassion and the mercy and the love of God that he suffers at the present. And this is what so often lays behind our suffering. God wants us to develop a maturity of our understanding of what he feels as he faces a lost world.

I think this is what lay behind the suffering of the prophet Hosea in the Old Testament. There was a deep tragedy in his family. His wife, Goma, was unfaithful to him, and this shadowed and shattered his home life and deeply entered into the heart of this prophet.

There is probably no pain so intense as that which one is caused by one's own family. The suffering of a child and the loss of a wife is devastating. But the suffering that Hosea experienced was probably the worst that any of us will ever or could endure.

The closest relationship that we have is that between a man and his wife. It's a relationship that God means to be the richest blessing to us as people. And yet this relationship had disintegrated into unmitigating pain for poor Hosea.

Hosea was a man of a broken heart because his home was broken. And yet what emerged out of Hosea's pain and agony and suffering was a tenderness in his ministry that you do not find anywhere else in the Old Testament. There is a demonstration of the compassion and the yearning and the longing in the heart of God for his people for repentance.

And Hosea, through the agony of his home life, learned what God was suffering as his people rejected him and were faithless to the covenant that he laid down. He was a man who entered into the pain and into the hurt of the heart of God, grieving over the infidelity of his people. And the longings of the heart of God to win back the wavering nation at any cost.

So God told Hosea that he had to go to the brothel where his wife worked and buy her back again and restore and love her again. And through that, the agony of doing that, he learned something of God's concern for the people. And that is the gospel of the broken heart of the world.

The gospel of the broken heart demands the ministry of the bleeding heart, as someone has written. And when we cease to bleed, we cease to bless. You cannot be an ambassador representing the suffering servant to the world unless you learnt what it is to suffer as he suffered.

It is a purity of character to us as we come to a profound understanding of the concerns and the love and the compassion and the mercy of God. It's relatively easy to preach with zeal and earnestness and passion. But unless you've learnt to suffer, you won't know what it means to preach with grace and with gentleness and with kindness and with love and with insight.

There is a maturity that's only gained through suffering. I think last Sunday, I was with Clint and Vivian Smith in Alexandria at the funeral of their son. Randy died a week ago yesterday.

And as I flew down in the plane, I said, what on earth can I say to these people? And I was praying. And it came to me so forcefully that Father knew what it was to lose a child. And because of that, he could comfort them so much more than I ever could.

And Father God gave his only son to a depth of agony and suffering that no child of earthly parents will ever undergo. So I was able really to tell them, Clint and Vivian, that Randy was more alive than he had ever been and that one day that they would see him. And I think Randy would tell them what a wonderful time he had had in the Father's house and that Clint and Vivian would see through their ministry that it had been worth it.

There is a maturity that only comes through suffering. And thirdly, in Hebrews 2.18, it says this, For since himself he was tempted in that which he has suffered, he is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted. And again in Hebrews 4.15, For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.

Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. So there is a loyalty that can be proved only through suffering. There is a maturity that can be gained only through suffering.

And then thirdly, there is an empathy that is born only through suffering. Martin Luther said there were three things that go into the making of a Christian minister. The word of God, prayer, and temptation.

And I was very impressed again, I spent many days in hospital in the last three weeks. And there are really two categories of nurses. I've come to a conclusion.

There are those who are bouncing with health, and consequently they are very brusque, if that's the right word. They chivvy their patients on, and are sometimes quite harsh. And then there are other nurses who seem to be intensely sympathetic.

And I asked a couple of them this question. Have you ever had an operation? And it was very noticeable that those who hadn't should have. Because it brought an empathy into their care for their patients.

And have you ever thought of the sufferings of Christ? All life long he suffered with the agony of being tempted. And what a battle he fought. If we think we're having a rough time, it's nothing compared with him.

He came to that great climax in Gethsemane, where he was faced with a temptation to turn his back on the cross. And he sweated great drops of blood. Actually, there's a physiological condition where if pain gets sufficiently great, you have a mechanism which shuts it off and you go unconscious.

But there are awful occasions where that mechanism, that shut-off mechanism doesn't work. And you remain conscious, and the pain intensifies and intensifies to such a degree that you actually do sweat drops of blood. There's a breakdown in your mechanism to causing sweat, if the intensity is so great.

It's very, very rare. And I think Jesus, in order to remain conscious in the temptation, in a sense, deliberately switched off that mechanism so that he could remain conscious. And as a consequence, the real agony of sweating drops of blood came through to him.

What an agony it was, and yet what an acid it became. Because he suffered, he sympathizes and understands those that suffer. That's what Hebrews 15 says.

We do not have a high priest who is ignorant of the things that we have been through. And because of that, we are able to draw near, because he understands, because he cares, because he's known what it is to go through what we're going through. And people constantly came to the Lord Jesus.

Now, do they come to you in your ministry? Do you understand people? Can you enter into the empathy with their sufferings and their pains? We live in a devastated world, full of horror and pain and suffering and grief. Are you capable of empathizing with people? Do they come to you because they know that you understand? Suffering is a key that opens a door to the ministry, into the hearts and lives of people who are hurting and who are shocked. Empathy that can only be born through suffering.

If we're to be conformed to the image of his son, then we need to know what it is to suffer as he suffered. So a loyalty proved only through suffering, a maturity gained only through suffering, an empathy born only through suffering, and lastly, a destiny reached only through suffering. Hebrews 13, 12, it talks about Christ's suffering outside the camp.

I'll have to read this to you. Can't remember it well enough. Therefore, Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people through his own blood, suffered outside the gates.

Hence, let us go out to him, outside the camp, bearing his reproach. Christ's sufferings were bound up with a whole redemptive purpose of God, and so are ours. And if you and I are going to be, in a sense, real believers, part of the living body of Christ, then we are going to have to be identified with Christ in his suffering.

There is a direct one-to-one link, in a sense, to redemption as it works out into the world and our suffering in it. Now, I think this comes in two parts. One is rejected by the world, our Lord was rejected, and you will be rejected too by the world.

The whole pattern of your life is crazy to them. And if there is a rejection by the world that we have to bear, then there is a redemption of the world in which we can share. And the school of suffering with Christ, being conformed to the image of his Son through suffering, being a partaker of his suffering, will result in you being Christ-like.

And then people will come to you as they came to him, because they will sense that you have the source of life and of power. If you bear the marks of the Lord Jesus, there will be an attractiveness and a

graciousness about your life. You will be made perfect through suffering.

The blackness that you feel will have been turned into gold. Let's pray. The school of suffering that the Lord is leading us through, a loyalty proved only through suffering, a maturity gained only through suffering, an empathy born only through suffering, and a destiny reached only through suffering, that I might know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings.

And is there someone here this morning, and in their life there's been so much black, as it were the divine potter seems to have been laying it on very thick, and you are discouraged, almost despairing. Remember that you're a child in the classroom of God's suffering. You're sitting where Jesus sat, and he passed through that classroom too.

Learn what he learnt, become what he became. And one day when you meet your Lord Jesus, you will understand what it's all been about, and you'll praise him for it all. Father God, thank you for putting us in this school.

We want to be made into the image of our Lord Jesus Christ. We want to know something of that power of your resurrection in our lives. We want to know something of the authority to minister in your name.

We want to see the breakthroughs in our ministry. But Lord, also we want to know something of the fellowship of your sufferings. We want to be conformed into the image of your Son.

And therefore may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is all-sufficient, and the love of God the Father, which never changes, and the abiding ministry of the help of the Holy Spirit, who never forsakes and always sustains us, rest upon you and remain with you this day and forevermore. Amen.

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