

# Counseling with Suffering People



BY JOHN PIPER

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I begin with five assumptions. Without them, what I have to say about counseling and suffering will not stand.

1. Counseling is conversational exultation in the manifold mercies of God.
2. Mutual counseling is a normative event in the conversations and relationships of the body of Christ.
3. The aim of true counseling is the glory of God through Jesus Christ.
4. God is most glorified in our lives when we are most satisfied in Him.
5. Suffering is a universal human experience, designed by God for His glory, but endangering every Christian's faith.

If the aim of wise counseling is the glory of God through Jesus Christ, and if God is most glorified in our people when they are most

satisfied in Him, and if the universal human experience of suffering threatens to undermine their faith in the goodness of God, and thus their satisfaction in His glory, then our conversations with each other must aim, day in and day out, to help us become satisfied in God while suffering. Indeed, we must help each other count suffering as part of why we should be satisfied in God.

We must build into our minds and hearts a vision of God and His ways that help us see suffering not merely as a threat to our satisfaction in God (which it is), but also as a means to our satisfaction in God (which it is). We must talk so as to make suffering seem normal and purposeful, and not surprising in this fallen age. The forces of American culture are almost all designed to build the opposite worldview into our minds. Maximize comfort, ease, and security. Avoid all choices that might bring discomfort, trouble, difficulty, pain, or suffering. Add this cultural force to our natural desire for immediate gratification and fleeting pleasures, and the combined power to undermine the superior satisfaction of the soul in the glory of God through suffering is huge.

If we would see God honored in each other's lives as the supreme value, highest treasure, and deepest satisfaction of our lives, then we must each strive with all our might to live and to show the meaning of suffering, and help others see the wisdom and power and

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*This article grows out of an earlier article on preaching, transposing it into a different key. It complements "Preaching to Suffering People" in Feed My Sheep (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2002, pp. 241-268) by presenting the same biblical ideas on the context of counseling ministry rather than preaching.*

goodness of God behind it ordaining; above it governing; beneath it sustaining; and before it preparing. This is the hardest work in the world: to change the minds and hearts of fallen human beings, and make God so precious to each other that we count it all joy when trials come, and exult in our afflictions, and rejoice in the plundering of our property, and say in the end, "To die is gain."

This is why good counseling is not mere therapeutic technique and why "personality theory" and getting scholarly degrees in "psychology" are so far from the essence of what counseling is about. Counseling is about doing the impossible: making the rich young ruler fall out of love with his comfortable lifestyle and into love with the King of kings so that he "joyfully" sells all that he has to gain that treasure (Matt. 13:44). Jesus said very simply, "With man this is impossible" (Matt. 19:26). The aim of our ministry to each other is impossible. No techniques will make it succeed. "But with God all things are possible."

In no place does this become more clear than when counseling confronts suffering. How shall we accomplish the great end of our mutual relationships in the face of suffering? Coming to Christ means more suffering, not less, in this world. I am persuaded that suffering is normal

- The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.
- Many are the afflictions of the righteous.
- A slave is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.
- If they have called the head of the house "Beelzebul," how much more will they malign the members of his household!
- Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.
- Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you.
- Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.
- Let no one be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this.
- We are fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.
- All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

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## Coming to Christ means more suffering, not less, in this world.

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and not exceptional. We all will suffer; we all must suffer; and most American Christians are not prepared in mind or heart to believe or experience this. Therefore the glory of God, the honor of Christ, the stability of the church, and the strength of commitment to world missions are at stake. If our conversations do not help people become satisfied in God through suffering, then God will not be glorified, Christ will not be honored, the church will be a weakling in an escapist world of ease, and the completion of the Great Commission with its demand for martyrdom will fail.

There is a certainty of suffering that will come to people if they embrace the Savior. "Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go." Really?

- I protest, brethren, by my pride in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day!
- If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied.<sup>1</sup>

People are going to suffer—that is certain.

And when this life of necessary suffering is at an end, there remains the last enemy, death. "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). For God's loved ones, dying will be the final suffering. For most of us it will be a terrible thing. In more

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<sup>1</sup>Matt. 8:19-20; Ps. 34:19; John 15:20; Matt. 10:25; 1 Pet. 2:21; 1 Pet. 4:12; Acts 14:22; 1 Thess. 3:3; Rom. 8:17-18; 2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Cor. 15:31; 1 Cor. 15:19.

than twenty years in the pastorate, I have walked with many saints through the last months and days and hours of dying. And very few have been easy. Everyone you and I talk with is going to die if Christ delays His coming. You and I too will die. We must all suffer and die.

“You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass....In the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away....So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom” (Ps. 90:5-12).

What does a pastoral heart of wisdom do when it discovers that death is sure, that life is short, and that suffering is inevitable and necessary? The answer is also given in Psalm 90. It is a prayer: “Have pity on Your servants! Satisfy us in the morning with Your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days” (vss. 13b-14). In the face of toil and trouble and suffering and death, wise friends and counselors cry out with the psalmist, “Satisfy us in the morning with Your steadfast love.” They pray this both for themselves and for others: “O God, grant that we would be satisfied with Your steadfast love always, and need nothing else”—and then they live and speak to that end.

Why? Because if counselors leave others where they are—seeking satisfaction in family and job and leisure and toys and sex and money and food and power and esteem—then, when suffering and death strip it all away, they will be embittered and angry and depressed. And the worth and beauty and goodness and power and wisdom of God, the glory of God, will vanish in the cloud of murmuring, complaining, and cursing.

But if counselors pray well (that God would satisfy us with Himself); if the counselor has loved and spoken well (showing others that they must suffer, but that God is more to be desired than comfort, and the steadfast love of the Lord is better than life [Ps. 63:3]); if counselors are living well (rejoicing to suffer for others’ sake); and if counselors linger long enough in one place of ministry, in real

relationships with many people, then many people will suffer well and die well, counting it gain because they are satisfied in God alone. God will therefore be mightily glorified, and the great end of counseling ministry will be achieved.

### ***Counseling and the Suffering of the Counselor***

If the ultimate aim of good counseling is the glory of God through Jesus Christ, if God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in Him, and if suffering threatens that satisfaction in God and must come, then we should talk and listen so as to help others say with the psalmist, from their heart, “The steadfast love of the LORD is better than life” (Ps. 63:3), and to say with Paul, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil. 3:8). Counselors must have a passion to produce people whose satisfaction in God is so solid, so deep, and so unshakable that suffering and death—losing everything this world can give—will not make people murmur or curse God, but rest in the promise, “In His presence is fullness of joy, at His right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps. 16:11).

But how shall men and women counsel like that? The answer is that we must suffer and in it we must rejoice. We must be hurt and we must be happy in God.

Follow with me the three generations of ministry from Christ through the Apostle Paul to Timothy. Jesus Christ came into the world to suffer. He took on human flesh so that there would be a body to torture and kill (Heb. 2:14). Suffering was the heart of His ministry.

- The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.
- Though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor so that you, through His poverty, might become rich.
- Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead.
- And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be

killed, and after three days rise again.<sup>2</sup> When Jesus talked with people—whether preaching to a crowd or conversing with an individual—He talked as one whose suffering embodied His message. He is absolutely unique in this. His suffering was the salvation that He spoke of.

But even though He was unique (and a counselor's suffering will never be the salvation of people in the same way), nevertheless He calls us to join Him in this suffering. Christ then makes that suffering part of our ministry and, in great measure, the power of our message. When they wanted to follow Him, He said, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Matt. 8:19-20). In other words, "Do you really want to follow Me? Know what you were called to!"

- A slave is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.
- If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign the members of his household!
- As the Father has sent Me, even so I send you.
- Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.<sup>3</sup>

sufferings. You can't complete perfection. They completed, rather, the extension of those sufferings in person, in a suffering representative, to those for whom Christ suffered.

Paul had to suffer in the ministry of the gospel. It was an essential extension of the sufferings of Christ. Why? Besides extending the sufferings of Christ in Paul's own suffering to others, there are other reasons. One of his testimonies gives another answer: "For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:8-9). Notice the purpose of this suffering: "So that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead." This is not the purpose of Satan, and it is not the purpose of Paul's enemies. It is the purpose of God. God ordained the suffering of His apostle so that he would be radically and totally dependent on nothing else but God. All is about to be lost on this earth. If there is anything left to hope in, it is God alone, who raises the dead. That is all. Paul's sufferings are designed to throw him back again and again on God alone as his hope and treasure.

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Specifically concerning the Apostle Paul, the risen Christ said, "I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake" (Acts 9:16). Paul understood his own sufferings as a necessary extension of Christ's for the sake of the church. So he said to the Colossians, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body, that is, the church" (Col. 1:24). Paul's sufferings did not complete the atoning worth of Christ's

But that is not the end of God's purpose. Second Corinthians 1:8-9 begins with the word "for." Paul's sufferings are meant to support what goes before, namely, the comfort of the church. Paul says this several ways. For example, verse 6: "If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort." So Paul's affliction as a counselor of the Word is designed not only to throw him solely on God for his comfort, but also to bring that same comfort and salvation to the people he serves. His suffering is for their sake.

How does that work? How do Paul's

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<sup>2</sup>Mark 10:45; 2 Cor. 8:9; Luke 24:46; Mark 8:31.

<sup>3</sup>John 15:20; Matt. 10:25; John 20:21; 1 Pet. 2:21.

sufferings help his people find their comfort and satisfaction in God alone? Paul explains it like this: “We have this treasure [the gospel of the glory of Christ] in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Cor. 4:7-9). In other words, these terrible things happen to Paul to show that the power of his ministry is not from himself, but is God’s power (verse 7). Paul’s suffering is designed by God to magnify the “surpassing greatness” of God’s power.

He says it again in verse 10: “Always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.” In other words, Paul shares in the sufferings of Christ in order to display the life of Jesus more clearly. The aim of the ministry of a wise and true counselor is to display Christ, to show that He is more to be desired than all earthly comforts and pleasures. And the suffering of the counselor is designed to make clear that Christ is in fact that valuable, that precious. “I die daily,” he says, “so that the surpassing value of Christ will be seen in my suffering body.” This is how it works. This is how Paul’s sufferings help his people find their comfort and satisfaction in God alone. It is not about technique; it is about how to live.

Paul says it again in 2 Corinthians 12:9. When he implored the Lord to take away the painful thorn in the flesh, Christ answered: “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness.” And Paul responds, “Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.” Paul’s thorn in the flesh served to humble Paul and to magnify the all-sufficiency of the grace of Christ.

So the suffering of the apostle displays the “surpassing greatness” of the power of God, the triumph of the “life of Jesus,” and the perfection of “the grace of Christ.” And when the people see this in the suffering of the Apostle Paul, it causes them to treasure Christ as more precious

than life, which produces a radically transformed life to the glory of God.<sup>4</sup>

Paul explains this dynamic in 2 Corinthians 3:18: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into His likeness from one degree of glory to another.” Beholding is becoming. When we see Him for who He really is in His glory, our hearts cherish Him, and thus magnify Him, and we are changed. Everything changes. That is the goal of biblical counseling. And that is the goal of the suffering of the one who would counsel others.

Paul puts it in one cryptic sentence in 2 Corinthians 4:12: “Death works in us, but life in you.” Suffering, weakness, calamity, and hardship work death in Paul, and in so doing show that the surpassing greatness of his ministry belongs to Christ, not to him. And that manifestation of the surpassing worth of Christ works life in those who see, because life comes from seeing and savoring Christ as our highest treasure.

So Christ comes to speak with people and to suffer. His suffering and death are the heart of His message. Then He appears to Paul and tells him how much he must suffer in the ministry of the gospel—not because Paul’s suffering and death is the content of his message, Christ’s is. But because, in his suffering, Christ’s suffering is seen and presented to those for whom He suffered, and His glory shines with surpassing value as the greatest treasure of the universe.

Then, when Paul undertakes to help Timothy (and us), what does he say? He says, by way of example, in 2 Timothy 2:10, “I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain salvation in Christ Jesus with its eternal glory.” God’s assignment for him as a counselor of the Word is to suffer for the elect.

Then he turns to Timothy and gives him the same calling, which is why I believe it applies to us. “Timothy, making disciples will cost you dearly.” Second Timothy 2:2-3: “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier

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<sup>4</sup>2 Cor. 4:7; 2 Cor. 4:10; 2 Cor. 12:9.

of Christ Jesus.” Entrust the word to others, Timothy. The price: “Suffer hardship with me.”

But what about counseling in particular? Paul addresses the issue directly in 2 Timothy 4:2-5: “Preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship.” Preach the Word,<sup>5</sup> endure hardship! Speak the Word, Timothy. The price? Endure hardship.

We must communicate with a passion to produce people whose satisfaction in God is so solid, so deep, and so unshakable that suffering and death will not make us murmur or curse

He says, “Most gladly, therefore, will I boast about my weaknesses” (2 Cor. 12:9). Yes, there is sorrow, sometimes almost unbearable sorrow. But even here he says, “as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor. 6:10). And when he writes to the Thessalonians to commend them for their faith, he says, “You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the Word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:6).

Why this stress on joy in the Lord, joy in the hope of the glory of God, joy from the Holy Spirit, and all in the midst of suffering? The reason is this: The aim of all ministry is the glory of God through Jesus Christ. God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him. But suffering is a great threat to our satisfaction in God. We are tempted to murmur, complain, blame, and even to curse and quit the ministry. Therefore, joy in God in

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God, but will help us count it all joy (James 1:2) and say with Paul, “To live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). How will that happen? I said that counselors must suffer. That is what I have tried to show thus far. And then counselors must rejoice. You must be hurt in the ministry, and you must be happy in God.

Of course Paul commands this of all of us. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice” (Phil. 4:4). “We exult in hope of the glory of God. And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations” (Rom. 5:2-3). It is crucial to see how Paul speaks of his own experience in suffering in the ministry of the Word. He does not just say to the Colossians, “I suffer for your sake.” He says, “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake.” He doesn’t just say to the Corinthians, “I boast about my weaknesses.”

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<sup>5</sup>The word translated “preach” is *kerusso*: to announce, to proclaim, to boldly and clearly state. The scope of the word is indifferent to whether you are speaking with one person you know well or to a thousand people you don’t know. Both a sermon from a pulpit and a conversation over coffee should contain the bold truth of the good news of grace.

the midst of suffering makes the worth of God—the all-satisfying glory of God—shine more brightly than it would through our joy at any other time. Sunshine happiness signals the value of sunshine. But happiness in suffering signals the value of God. Suffering and hardship joyfully accepted in the path of obedience to Christ show the supremacy of Christ more than all our faithfulness in fair days.

When a counselor speaks openly with this joy and this suffering, others see Christ for the infinite value that He is, and, seeing, will cherish Him above all things and thus be changed from one degree of glory to the next. The glory of God will be magnified in the church and in the world, and the great aim of counseling ministry will be achieved.

### ***Counseling and the Suffering of the People***

Suffering will come to believers. It must come. It is part of our calling. In Philippians 1:29, Paul tells the entire church in Philippi, “To you it has been granted for Christ’s sake

not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.” This is a gift from God to all believers. We are appointed to suffer. “You yourselves know that we have been destined for this” (1 Thess. 3:3). We counsel the disciples of Jesus, not disciples of Hugh Hefner. “Can we wish, if it were possible, to walk in a path strewed with flowers when His was strewed with thorns?”<sup>6</sup>

For the glory of God to be manifest in our lives, we must rejoice in suffering rather than murmur and complain. This is why the Bible tells us again and again:

- Blessed are you when men revile you... rejoice and be glad.
- We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance.
- Count it all joy...when you meet various trials.
- Rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings.
- You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property.
- They left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.<sup>7</sup>

People are not prepared or able to rejoice in suffering unless they experience a massive biblical revolution of how they think and feel about the meaning of life. Human nature and American culture make it impossible to rejoice in suffering. This is a miracle in the human soul wrought by God through His Word. It is the aim of true counseling to be the agent of God in bringing about that miracle through the Word.

Jesus said to Peter at the end of John’s Gospel, “When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.’ Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God” (John 21:18-19). In other words, God appoints a kind of suffering and death by which each of us is called to glorify God. And, since the great aim of honest conversing with each other is the glory of God, we must counsel to prepare people to suffer and die like that.

<sup>6</sup>John Newton, *The Works of John Newton* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), Vol. 1, p. 230.

<sup>7</sup>Matt. 5:11-12; Rom. 5:3; James. 1:2; 1 Pet. 4:13; Heb. 10:34; Acts 5:41.

It is important, then, for counselors to understand how their own suffering affects their counseling for the sake of their suffering people.

First, God has ordained that our conversations become deeper and more winsome as we are broken, humbled, and made low and desperately dependent on grace by the trials of our lives. Jesus said it about His own ministry like this: “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:28-29). People will come and learn from us how to suffer if we are “gentle and lowly in heart.” By experience, you learn more about how to listen, what to listen for, how to grieve, when and what to say, how to be silent, how to be bold. And that is what our sufferings are designed to make us. “We were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself...[so that we would] rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead” (2 Cor. 1:8-9). God aims to break us of all pretenses to self-sufficiency, and make us lowly and childlike in our dependence on God. This is the kind of counselor to whom the suffering come.

John Newton wrote to a fellow pastor and said,

It belongs to your calling of God as a minister, that you should have a taste of the various spiritual trials which are incident to the Lord’s people, that thereby you may...know how to speak a word in season to them that are weary; and it is likewise needful to keep you perpetually attentive to that important admonition, “Without Me ye can do nothing.”<sup>8</sup>

It is true that we must be personally bold and afraid of no man but courageous as we contend for the truth. If we are simply nice, concerned, genuinely curious, attentive, supportive, and affirming, we may win a hearing with suffering people, but we will never lead them to life. Grace means courage and clarity. But it is just as true that our boldness must be brokenhearted boldness, that our courage must be a contrite and lowly courage,

<sup>8</sup>John Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, Vol. 1, p. 255.

and that we must be tender contenders for the truth. If we are brash and harsh and cocky and clever, we may win a hearing with angry and pugnacious people, but we will drive away those who suffer. Paul makes it so clear that we are laid low and given comfort “so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor. 1:4). Those we counsel must feel that we are utterly dependent in our lives on the merciful comfort of God to make it through our days.

Second, God has ordained that when we counsel amid weakness and suffering sustained by joy in Christ, others see that Christ is treasured and they are loved. Here we are up against a huge obstacle in American culture. The twentieth century was the century of the self. Almost all virtues, especially love, were reinterpreted to put the self at the center. This means that almost all our people are saturated and shaped with the conviction that the essence of being loved as a human is being treasured or esteemed. That is, you love me to the degree that your act of treasuring terminates on me. Sufferers are creatures of such a culture.

But God ordains the suffering of counselors to show the all-surpassing worth of Jesus because we treasure Christ as we speak with people. And if they ask, “Do you treasure me or do you treasure Christ?” I answer, “I treasure Christ, and, desiring to treasure Him more, I treasure your treasuring Christ.” Without the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit removing human self from the center, this will not satisfy American people. They are so saturated with self-oriented love that they can scarcely conceive what true Christian love is. True Christian love is not my making much of them, but my helping them to enjoy making much of God. This is love. If my treasuring terminates on them, I play right into the hands of the devil and their own self-centered destruction. But if my treasuring terminates on God and their treasuring God, then I direct them to the one source of all joy. And that act of directing them to God, their hope and life and joy, is what love is.

Our aim in counseling is not to help our people feel treasured, but to help them treasure God. We must aim to relate in such a way that

we breed a kind of people who feel loved not when they are made much of, but when they are patiently helped to enjoy making much of God, even when they themselves are slandered, ridiculed, persecuted, and killed. This is impossible with man, but with God all things are possible. When the Holy Spirit comes in power in our loving conversations, people see that Christ is treasured and they are loved, and that those two things are one. God has ordained that one way they see Christ treasured in us is how we are sustained by Him in suffering.

Third, the suffering of counselors helps us see from the Scripture what we must say to our suffering friends. Martin Luther made the point powerfully and straight out of the Bible, not just from experience. He cited Psalm 119:67 and :71: “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word....It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes.” Here Luther found an indispensable key for the Christian in unlocking texts. “It was good for me that I was afflicted that I may learn Thy statutes.” There are things to see in the Word of God that our eyes can only see through the lens of tears.

Luther said it this way: “I want you to know how to study theology in the right way. I have practiced this method myself....Here you will find three rules. They are frequently proposed throughout Psalm [119] and run thus: *Oratio, meditatio, tentatio* (prayer, meditation, tribulation).”<sup>9</sup> And tribulations he called the “touchstone.” They “teach you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God’s Word is; it is wisdom supreme.”<sup>10</sup>

He proved the value of suffering over and over again in his own experience. “For as soon as God’s Word becomes known through you, the devil will afflict you, will make a real doctor of you, and will teach you by his temptations to seek and to love God’s Word. For I myself...owe my papists many thanks for so beating, pressing, and frightening me through the devil’s raging

<sup>9</sup>Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), Vol. 3, p. 1359.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 1360.



that they have turned me into a fairly good theologian, driving me to a goal I should never have reached.”<sup>11</sup>

Luther calls it theology. I call it ministry, whether talking one-on-one with a struggler or preaching a sermon. In other words, Psalm 119:71 teaches us that the suffering of the counselor opens the Scriptures in a way he or she would not otherwise know them. Our sufferings show us in the Scriptures what to say to others, mingled with how to say it.

The first thing you will learn to say to people is that they must suffer. You will make it a theme running through all your conversations: They will get sick; they will be persecuted; they will be hurt, disappointed, and frustrated; and they will die. They must be reminded of these things again and again, because almost all forces in the culture are pushing them away from these realities and trying to get them not to think about it and therefore not to be ready for it, and certainly not to value it when it comes.

When suffering teaches you the meaning of Scripture, you will learn and be able to communicate that all suffering is of one piece, and that saints will taste all of it—sickness, persecution, pain, and death.

You will show people from Romans 8:23 that we will get sick. “We ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our

day (2 Cor. 4:16). We will live this and speak this, and give those we know and love a theology of sickness.

And we will talk about how persecution, whether small or large, must come. “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). You will balance with warning the caution that they not seek to provoke offense. The gospel and the path of sacrifice and the cause of truth are the offense, not the cranky personalities of the saints. The aim is to treasure Christ above all things, and to love people with the truth no matter the cost. That will bring the trouble. Our conversations must contain this truth to motivate others and prepare them.

We will talk about how we will suffer hardships of many sorts. “Count it all joy when you meet various trials” (James 1:2). Loneliness, misunderstandings, conflicts, disappointments, dashed hopes—this is the real context for developing the only true joy.

We will talk about how we must all die, and we will bend every effort to help people say, when the time comes, “To die is gain.” If we can help others value Christ above all that death will take away, they will be the freest and most radical, sacrificial people in life.

Not only must we discuss that people will all get sick and be persecuted and suffer and die, but also that God is sovereign and designs all their suffering for their everlasting good. John

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## If we can help others value Christ above all that death will take away, they will be the freest and most radical, sacrificial people in life.

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adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.” Yes, you will teach people to pray for their healing and you will pray with heartfelt concern. But you will also teach them that the full and final blood-bought healing of Christ is for the age to come when all crying and pain and tears will be no more (Rev. 21:4). In this age we groan, waiting for the redemption of our bodies. Here the outer nature is wasting away while our inner nature is being renewed day by

Newton again is right when he says that one of Satan’s main devices against God’s people is to hide from them the Lord’s designs in permitting him thus to rage.<sup>12</sup> Counseling should not hide these designs, but reveal them. That is how we will establish those we counsel and give them hope and joy in suffering. They must know and cherish the truth that their adversaries (natural and supernatural) meant it for evil, but God meant it for good (Gen. 50:20).

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

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<sup>12</sup>John Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, Vol. 1, p. 233.

Some people will stumble over the word “designs,” that God actually plans the suffering of His people and therefore has good designs in it. William Barclay (an old-line liberal from a generation ago) represents many when he says, “I believe that pain and suffering are never the will of God for His children.”<sup>13</sup> There are open theists today who teach, “God does not have a specific divine purpose for each and every occurrence of evil.”<sup>14</sup> Or, as one says, “When an individual inflicts pain on another individual, I do not think we can go looking for ‘the purpose of God’ in the event....I know Christians frequently speak about ‘the purpose of God’ in the midst of a tragedy caused by someone else.... But this I regard to simply be a piously confused way of thinking.”<sup>15</sup>

Do *not* say that to sufferers, and so undermine their biblical hope. Their hope is this—and you will see it most clearly and say it most sweetly when you have experienced it most deeply—that all their suffering is the discipline of their Father for their good; it is the refining fire of faith; it is the crucible of perseverance and character and hope; it is the preparation of an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. And if we will believe and rejoice, it is the display of the supreme value of Christ when we are all able to say, “The steadfast love of the LORD is better than life.”<sup>16</sup> It is not by accident, but by design, that all wise people confess with Malcolm Muggeridge who,

at the end of his life, said, “Looking over my 90 years, I realize I have never made any progress in good times. I only progressed in the hard times.”<sup>17</sup> When we experience this, we are more alert to it in Scripture, and when we see it, then we communicate it to our suffering brothers and sisters.

There is one last connection between the counselor’s suffering and the suffering of others. Your suffering will show you that the timing of teaching and touching is crucial. “There is a time for everything...a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; ...a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;...a time to keep silence, and a time to speak” (Eccl. 3:1, 4-7). Wise conversation involves timing. Live and communicate the whole truth about suffering and the sovereign goodness of God while it is day, and when the night comes and you stand beside the suicide victim’s pool of blood or the ice-cold, ivory body of a one-year-old boy, you won’t have to say anything. This will be a time for embracing. At this point the suffering saints will be glad that your suffering has taught you to say the hard things and then, at the right time, to be silent.

When you walk through your own valley of darkness you learn these things. This is your lifelong seminary. If you are called to counsel others, I entreat you, do not begrudge the seminary of suffering.

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<sup>13</sup>William Barclay, *A Spiritual Autobiography* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), p. 44.

<sup>14</sup>John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 262.

<sup>15</sup>Greg Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic: A Son Wrestles with His Father’s Questions about Christianity* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1994), pp. 46-47.

<sup>16</sup>Heb. 12:11; 1 Pet. 1:7; Rom. 5:3-4; 2 Cor. 4:17; Ps. 63:3.

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<sup>17</sup>Quoted in Fred Smith, “Mentored by the Prince of Preachers,” *Leadership* (Summer 1992), p. 54.