

deal of wealth. Boulevards, schools, and libraries are named after him because of his philanthropic contributions. Just before his death, he came to the city fathers and told them that he would give to them all of his wealth if they would be willing to name the city after him. Brevity of life causes man to cling to it and to reach out for immortality in whatever form he can find it.

Isaiah 47:8-10: "Therefore hear now this, thou that art given to pleasures, that dwellest carelessly, that sayest in thine heart, 'I am, and none else beside me; I shall not sit as a widow, neither shall I know the loss of children.' But these two things shall come to thee in a moment in one day, the loss of children, and widowhood; they shall come upon thee in their perfection for the multitude of thy sorceries, and for the great abundance of thine enchantments. For thou hast trusted in thy wickedness; thou hast said, 'None seeth me.' Thy wisdom and thy knowledge, it hath perverted thee; and thou hast said in thine heart, 'I am, and none else beside me.'" Because man strives for immortality in the wrong way, he runs contrary to the purposes of God. The subject of this passage is Babylon, but it can be readily applied to all of mankind.

In a famous passage prophesying the coming Jesus Christ, Isaiah writes, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every-one to his own way" (53:6). Again, the prophet wrote, "But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities like the wind, have taken us away" (64:6).

A proper perspective of God and man shows us that all of the evil and calamity that falls upon man is a product of his own folly and sinfulness. Conversely, all of the good that falls upon man is a product of God's grace and mercy. The natural man takes issue with this. He, in violent disagreement, could turn this around and say that all of man's achievements, his blessings, and his progress are attributed to his own ingenuity and greatness. However, when calamity and disaster strike, he is quick to blame God.

People who have trouble attributing all that is good to God and all that is evil and wrong to the sinfulness of man understand neither the character of God nor the character of man. Now, we must be quick to remind ourselves that circumstances often enter our lives that are a reflection of God's perfect plan but which we, because of our lack of perspective, interpret to be evil. Take, for instance, the cross of Calvary. If you and I were with the disciples on that eventful day, we, like they, would no doubt have seen the crucifixion as a tragedy. Likewise, if we had been with the women at the tomb on that Sunday morning when they found it empty, we, like they, would have concluded that a further calamity had struck, that somebody had stolen the body.

However, with the perspective of 2,000 years, we view both the cross and the empty tomb not as calamities or disasters, but as triumphs and victories. Often a seemingly adverse circumstance

will strike, such as the loss of a loved one, and from our perspective it has all the marks of a tragedy. But from God's perspective, it may very well be the unfolding of a higher and more beautiful plan.

God's Commitment to Man

Much of Isaiah 40-66 is Messianic, and by and large the promises contained in these chapters are either to the Messiah or to the nation of Israel. However, the Holy Spirit promises, "The counsel of the Lord standeth for ever, the thoughts of His heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:11). Just as we can see in these great chapters the nature of God and man, we can also draw some principles and promises for our own lives.

Consider the promise God makes to us in Isaiah 58:10-12: "And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday; and the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones; and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places. Thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, 'The repairer of the breach,' 'The restorer of paths to dwell in.'"

Your light will rise in obscurity. The Lord will assume responsibility for guiding you. During the dry periods in your life, the Lord will satisfy your soul. You will have the privilege of becoming the foundation of many generations. But all of this is qualified by an "if." If you draw your soul to the hungry and afflicted. If you will devote your life to this kind of goal and objective, God will in turn prosper you beyond your wildest imagination.

This is God's commitment to man. In His love, He saves us through the finished work of Jesus Christ and then He blesses and prospers us so that as we take on the character of Jesus Christ, we can effect a change in the lives of other people. All of this in turn spells "purpose" for the believer. This is what disciple-making is all about.

Let me urge you to look further at Isaiah 40-66. Read through these great chapters three separate times. The first time through, write down all you learn about the nature and character of God. In your second reading, write down all you learn about the nature and character of man. The third time through, write down all the you learn about God's commitment to man. This third reading will stagger you. Having learned of His greatness and our tendency to sin, you will see how graciously He has dealt with us.

CHARACTER IN ACTION

A Christian is not immune to the experience of suffering. Sickness, sorrow, death, disappointment, and pain are experienced by all men. But for a Christian, suffering carries with it the promise of God's sovereign purpose in shaping the inner qualities of life.

GOD'S ULTIMATE CONTROL

1. What do the following verses teach about God's perspective and purpose?

Isaiah 45:5-7

Isaiah 46:9-10

2. What did Joseph say about the difficult circumstances and troublesome people he faced? Genesis 50:20
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3. Read Romans 8:28.

- a. What was Paul's conclusion?
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- b. To whom was this promise made?
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4. Can you describe an experience in your life which at the time did not seem to be producing anything good, yet later proved to be beneficial?
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THE PURPOSE OF SUFFERING

5. Read Isaiah 52:13-53:12, which describes the Messiah as God's suffering servant.

a. In what ways did Christ suffer unjustly? Isaiah 53:3-5

b. How did He respond to this suffering? Verse 7

c. For whose sake did He endure this suffering? Verses 8, 10-12

d. How does Christ's suffering relate to you? I Peter 2:21

6. What are some of the reasons God tested the children of Israel?

Deuteronomy 8:2

Deuteronomy 8:3 _____

Deuteronomy 8:16 _____

7. What are some further purposes of suffering?

John 15:2 _____

Hebrews 12:6-7 _____

I Peter 1:6-7 _____

8. Why should we not be surprised to suffer for Christ?
I Peter 4:12-13

9. Reflect on Jesus' words in John 15:18-21.

a. What does this reveal about the world's attitude toward God?

b. Why can we expect this response?

YOUR RESPONSE TO SUFFERING

10. Read Luke 6:22-23

a. What type of suffering can we expect?

b. How should we respond?

11. Examine James 1:2-4.

a. What should be our attitude as we experience various trials?

b. Why can we have this attitude?

12. Read Ephesians 5:20 and I Thessalonians 5:18.

a. How does God want us to respond to every situation?

b. Why is this response important?

13. Is there any circumstance in your life for which you have not been able to thank God from the heart?

a. Check one answer:

☐

Yes

☐

No

b. What is it? _____

c. What keeps you from thanking God for it? _____

d. What action could you take to resolve this conflict? _____

14. Read Philipians 1:12-21.

a. How did Paul suffer? _____

b. What was his attitude? _____

c. What were the results of his suffering? _____

15. What attitudes toward suffering were shown by the following men?

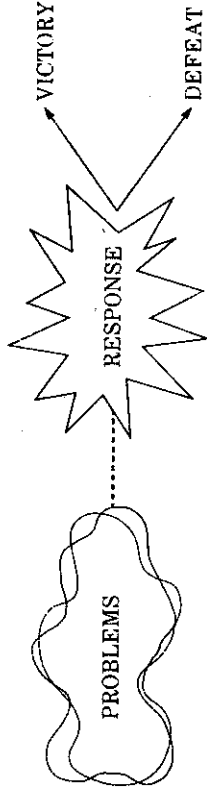
Job--Job 1:20-22 _____

The Apostles--Acts 5:40-41 _____

Stephen--Acts 7:59-60

Paul--Romans 8:18

A man's response to problems determines his maturity level. Each crisis is an opportunity for victory or defeat.



16. What wrong responses could be demonstrated in the midst of suffering? Why are they wrong?

Psalms 106:13-15

Romans 12:17-19

Hebrews 12:15

THE RESULTS OF SUFFERING

17. Read Romans 5:3-5. What are some possible results of suffering?

18. What can God's loving discipline produce in you?
Hebrews 12:10-11

19. Read II Corinthians 1:3-4.

a. What does this passage tell you about the benefits of suffering?

b. Name a person you know who is presently going through a difficult time.

c. What can you do to encourage this person?

20 Read Psalm 119:67,71.

a. What can afflictions produce in you?

b. How do you think this happens?

21. Psalm 78 recounts God's dealings with the nation of Israel. Often God did things for the benefit of His people which they failed to see from His perspective. Rather, they saw them from their own short-range point of view. From verses 11-18, list several ways God acted for the good of His children.

When God wants to drill a man
And thrill a man
And skill a man;
When God wants to mold a man
To play the noblest part;
When He yearns with all His heart
To create so great and bold a man
That all the world shall be amazed--
Watch His methods, watch His ways!
How He ruthlessly perfects
Whom He royally elects!
How He hammers him and hurts him,
And with mighty blows converts him
Into trial shapes of clay which
Only God understands,
While his tortured heart is crying
And he lifts beseeching hands!
How He bends but never breaks
When His good He undertakes;
How He uses whom He chooses
And with every purpose fuses him,
By every act induces him
To try His splendor out--
God knows what He's about!

J. OSWALD SANDERS*

Remember These Points:

Add a sentence or two to the following statements to summarize the most important points you learned from each section in this chapter.

God's Ultimate Control

God is in control of the circumstances surrounding us.

* From Spiritual Leadership, page 141.

The Purpose of Suffering

We should expect to suffer, and should learn something from trials.

Your Response to Suffering

God wants us to display joy and thanksgiving in all situations.

The Results of Suffering

Suffering produces good qualities in our lives.

