

Chapter 17 - Embrace Suffering

1. Take a few minutes to reflect on the story.
 - A) Paul's suffering included ordinary things like lack of sleep, hunger and psychological stress, but extended to accidents like shipwrecks and intentional malice like false accusations, physical assaults and imprisonment, yet, we never see Paul in a pity party. Why do you think this was?
 - B) Paul's suffering was purposeful in a way that most of ours is not. Yet when we count things like faithfulness and perseverance to be part of the good fruit of pain, even disease and disabilities, not to mention emotional cruelty, can result in blessing. How does this make sense in your life?
 - C) In his writings, Paul associates his "boasting" regarding things of the flesh (whether his strict following of the Jewish law or his physical sufferings) with "foolishness." How would putting these ideas together in your mind help you to look at your pain in a different light?

2. Just as there are ordinary blessings which all humans enjoy and there are special blessings for God's people, there are ordinary sufferings which all humans experience and special sufferings reserved for God's children. Jot down a few examples of each kind of suffering.

3. Suffering is a fairly major theme in the New Testament. After reading this chapter in the *Refresh*, paying special attention to the Biblical Background section, write down a few sentences to describe how suffering has played a role in your life, either positively or negatively.

4. Suffering is one of those things that accepting personally is beneficial, but telling others to think about how good it is for them can be harmful. Think of a time when you were suffering. What did you crave from your family and friends at that time?

5. Suffering often estranges people from each other because most often there is nothing we can do to make the pain go away, so we avoid the sufferer rather than risk the embarrassment of an encounter in which we'll feel inadequate or awkward. Jot down some thoughts on what you have learned from shared suffering (either as the "sufferer" or the "sufferee").

6. I have known a few people who have suffered in catastrophic ways, who, after a time of adjustment have not only come to terms with their suffering, but are truly grateful for it. Find such an account that speaks to you (personal experience, online, in a magazine or book) and write down some notes about it and discuss it with your group. (If you're not in a group share the story with a friend.)

7. Sometimes our suffering makes sense in that we can understand why it happened and we may even be able to see some benefit for us or someone else. Sometimes, it makes no sense at all that we can discover. Think of one example of each to share with a friend or your group.

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8. Ultimately all of our suffering will be redeemed, that is, turned into blessing for us and glory for God. Though we'll have to wait for Heaven to experience this in its fullness, sometimes it happens to some degree during our physical life. Comment on how you've seen this in your own life.
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For Group Leaders:

It is very likely that among your group members are some who are intimately acquainted with significant physical or emotional pain in their lives. Be especially sensitive to them as you discuss suffering.

Some of your group will be very quick to talk about some kinds of abuse you may not feel is appropriate for the whole group to hear. Let everyone know, up front, that you reserve the right to limit the group discussion, but that you are willing to meet privately to listen to and pray with people with sensitive issues which have caused them great pain.

Spend some time praying together about the suffering of people in the group or their loved ones. Remember what you've learned about praying not just for relief from the pain but that God would bless them through their suffering. This is especially important if you have situations where a physical problem is irreversible (humanly speaking) or emotional pain is being inflicted within a relationship that is inescapable for one reason or another.

Exercise your wisdom about this, but you may want to include an opportunity for people to share their pain (which social convention often forces them to hide) so that others can "weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15) and "bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2). Sometimes, just sharing the suffering helps us to persevere through it.