

Living in a modern, Western society comes with many advantages over most times and places in human history. We do not have to contend with wars, famines, and the grinding physical labor that have accompanied most people's lives throughout history. One problem that can arise, however, is that because of our material abundance we have not had to give as much thought to the spiritual significance of life that most other societies have and that can leave us vulnerable to the inevitable suffering that every human life is susceptible to. In short, when we do suffer, we don't always know what to do. Let's spend some time this week thinking about our suffering, what God says about it, and how it can be redeemed.

Day 1

Why or Why Not?

Many times as I consider projects around the house I count the cost. Not the cost in dollars, although there are situations where that is prudent, but mostly I count the cost in trouble, in effort, and in frustration. I count the cost in "suffering." Not real, martyr type suffering but cushy, rich, modern western life type suffering. Sometimes it's a passing consideration, but other times I am looking for a reason not to take on the project. As I was considering this, I realized that much of our thinking can look like this in various aspects of our life. We can look for reasons not to go to work, not to talk to a stranger, or not to engage in evangelism. We let some level of discomfort or suffering determine our course of action, and as we do that we assign value to the actions of our lives. If I let a small amount of suffering keep me from an action, I assign a low value to that action in a real and concrete way. The long-term results of devaluing various aspects of my life can be nothing other than having a life of low value, which seems certain to end in depression and unhappiness. The better question seems to be how much is my life worth? Will the "suffering" keep me from accomplishing my task if I am determined? Why not pay the price and have a life of greater value? In the end, the only real currency for how we value something is suffering, and without it we have no way to measure what its true value is to us.

Verses: 1 Peter 5:10, Romans 8:18, Romans 5:3-5

Prayer Topics: Counting the cost, purpose in suffering, present vs future suffering, what kind of suffering? What are we trying to accomplish?

Day 2

Track Progress

Most of the time our progress toward any goal is slow and difficult to measure. Do you want to be a better parent? How much progress did you make toward that today? Most days, weeks, or even years we don't take any time to track the progress we have made to our most important goals, even if we have taken the time to list our most important goals, which often we haven't. This is a mistake, in my estimation. The problem is twofold. If we don't track our progress, we are unlikely to make much and we lose connection with the value and meaning of our suffering. There is a reason that God does not transfigure us to heaven at the moment of our baptism. The world needs to be redeemed, and while the sacrificial work of redemption was finished by Christ on the cross, the reality of that sacrifice and the knowledge of it must be manifested throughout the world in the lives of believers. We, and the world, must be redeemed and glorified. The process of sanctification continues for us as believers, and that sanctification has an impact on the world as we become better witnesses, better priests, and kings, and as we work to bring the reality of the kingdom to fruition in the world. We continue to suffer in our earthly bodies while this happens, and the progress we make gives meaning and purpose to the suffering we endure. For some of us this suffering is currently minimal, but for others the season of life they are in

brings great physical, mental or emotional suffering that is close to the limit of what they can bear. If we fail to track our progress in good works, in sanctification, and in glorifying God, we risk failing in those things or failing to understand what gives meaning and purpose to the difficulties of our lives. Don't let your suffering be wasted.

Verses: 1 Corinthians 15:58, 2 Timothy 1:7, Psalm 90:12, 1 Timothy 4:15

Prayer Topics: What one thing can we track this week? What's the bigger goal we're working towards? Why haven't we made progress in this area so far?

Day 3

Finish

I have several unfinished projects around my house, and perhaps you do as well. Some of these projects remain unfinished because I hit a point where the sacrifice needed to bring it to completion jumped unexpectedly, so I moved on to other things. This is obviously not a good decision. There are times when we let the sunk cost fallacy drain our resources, but most of the time the projects that we leave unfinished just need for us to make a more complete sacrifice and they will bear fruit that is worth the investment. The reason finishing is so important is because, in most cases, we leave a certain amount of suffering "on the table" and unfruitful until the project is complete. Do that often enough, and your life will contain a considerable amount of useless suffering that will begin to define your attitude toward suffering in general. You will begin to think of all suffering as useless and unfruitful and will begin to refrain from engaging in proper sacrifice that gets rewarded. The result of that is a downcast attitude toward life and God that prevents true joy and happiness as well as authentic worship. To see this in action we have only to look at Cain, who was told after his sacrifice that if he did well, he would be rewarded. Rather than finishing the sacrifice, he went about downcast and eventually killed his brother. Spend some time today looking around your life and seeing if there are any projects, relationships, or anything else that needs to be finished. Don't let your suffering be wasted.

Verses: Philippians 1:6, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, James 2:18

Prayer Topics: What's stopping us from making the appropriate sacrifice to complete our goals? Are there any small or big changes we can make in our thinking this week to encourage us to act? Is there a greater joy we could be working towards?

Day 4

Think Long Term

When you engage in some activity that requires effort and sacrifice, do you think about the cost or the reward? Most of the time we focus on the present, on the difficulty, or on the discomfort. Most people have a fear of public speaking, and if asked to give a speech would spend a great deal of time thinking about how nervous they will be, how they could mess up, and how humiliated they would feel if they froze up. Most people would spend way more time thinking of these costs to giving the speech than they would of the rewards of the speech. What are the rewards? How about the excitement of facing something difficult and scary, or the pride of giving a good speech. How about the benefit that presenting the truth to others might bring them, or the satisfaction of conquering a fear and the confidence that you could get from that experience. What about the benefit of becoming the kind of person that could be called on to give a speech, or the joy of knowing that you now have the knowledge and ability to overcome any other fear in your life by following the same process? The bible says that our light and momentary troubles achieve for us a far greater glory. The problem is we tend to spend

way more time thinking about the light and momentary trouble than the greater glory because the trouble is near and the glory is far away. The reality is, however, that although the glory is farther away it is also longer lasting, a lot longer lasting. Think long term, and your suffering won't go to waste.

Verses: Colossians 3:23-24, Galatians 6:9, James 1:12, Psalm 37:4

Prayer Topics: What is the most glorious or joyful thing we can pursue? What would make all the endurance worthwhile?

Day 5

Meaning or Removing?

Throughout this week I have said nothing about taking away our suffering and that will surely be a disappointment to some. The reality is that there is only a portion of our suffering that we can do anything to remove. Many times, we suffer because of sin, and if we stop sinning, we will stop suffering in that way. Aside from sinning, we suffer for a multitude of reasons that we can do little to alleviate. If we can't get rid of suffering, what can we do? We can give suffering meaning and purpose, and most of the time, perhaps all the time, that is enough. We are told in scripture that our light and momentary troubles achieve for us a glory that outweighs them all. We do not suffer in vain. God, who works all things for our good, allows us to suffer only for our good. We must trust in the God who loves us and withholds nothing good from us. If we suffer, we can be sure that the redemption of that suffering to our glory is not only possible, it is the reason for the suffering. Trust in God. We cannot be rid of suffering while on this earth, but we can make sure it does not go to waste.

Verses: Psalm 130:7, 1 Peter 1:18-19, 1 Corinthians 6:20, 1 Corinthians 1:30

Prayer Topics: Are we doing what we can to eliminate unnecessary suffering? Does our current suffering have a higher purpose? Are we enduring our suffering with a hope of future redemption?