Lesson Four

Grace in the Midst of Difficulties

TRUTH

If you ask anyone who has walked with Christ for a number of years whether following Christ has made his life trouble-free, more often than not you will hear that life has been difficult. God never promised that life would be easy, but that He would be with us in the midst of difficulties.

Jesus said, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Peter puts it this way, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12). Troubles, trials and sufferings are a part of life and we should not be surprised when they come.

Our response to troubles reflects our view of God, our faith in Him, and the work of the gospel in our lives. Is God really in control? Can He really use the difficulties in life for my good? Everything that is brought into our lives is used by God to refine us and shape us into the image if Christ.

James also provides a similar perspective on suffering, difficulties and trials. “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4). Warren Wiersbe remarks on this passage saying, “The only way the Lord can develop patience and character in our lives is through trials. Endurance cannot be attained by reading a book, listening to a sermon, or even praying a prayer. We must go through the difficulties of life, trust God, and obey Him. The result will be patience and character. Knowing this we can face trials joyfully. We know what trials will do in us and for us, and we know that the end result will bring glory to God” (Wiersbe. Be Mature, 26).

On the Anvil

Max Lucado refers to God reshaping us through trials and difficulties as being ‘on the anvil.’ At this point I will quote at length from Lucado’s book On the Anvil: Stories on Being Shaped into God’s Image because it gives us a picture of the blacksmith’s work and thus God’s work.

“On the solid anvil, the smoldering iron is remolded.

The smith knows the type of instruments he wants. He knows the size. He knows the shape. He knows the strength.

Whang! Whang! The hammer slams. The shop rings with noise, the air fills with smoke, and the softened metal responds.
But the response doesn’t come easily. It doesn’t come without discomfort. To melt down the old and recast the new is a disrupting process. Yet the metal remains on the anvil, allowing the toolmaker to remove the scars, repair the cracks, refill the voids, and purge the impurities.

And with time, a change occurs: What was dull becomes sharpened, what was crooked becomes straight, what was weak becomes strong, and what was useless becomes valuable.

Then the blacksmith stops. He ceases his pounding and sets down his hammer. With a strong left arm, he lifts the tongs until the freshly molded metal is at eye level. In the still silence, he examines the smoking tool. The incandescent implement is rotated and examined for any mars or cracks. There are none.

Now the smith enters the final stage of his task. He plunges the smoldering instrument into a nearby bucket of water. With a hiss and rush of steam, the metal immediately begins to harden. The heat surrenders to the onslaught of cool water, and the pliable, soft metal becomes unbending, useful tool" (Lucado. On the Anvil, 41-43).

So it is anvil time. “On God’s anvil. Perhaps you’ve been there. Melted down. Formless. Undone. Placed on the anvil for...reshaping? Discipline? Testing?” (45) Peter describes ‘anvil time’ as suffering grief in all kinds of trials. He says ‘anvil time’ is of greater worth than gold. It is like being refined by fire. Here on the anvil faith is proved genuine, and God gets the glory and honor because it is His workmanship.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (1 Peter 1:3-7)

Clowney comments on this passage. Reflection on what God has done for us fills us with exultant joy. In this you greatly rejoice. Dramatically, Peter moves from ecstasy to agony. We who rejoice in Christ suffer grief in all kinds of trials. He now gives four reasons why we cannot only endure trials, but rejoice in hope in the midst of trials. First, hope in Christ points us beyond the trials to eternity. Second, we are strengthened through the very suffering we endure and our faith is proven genuine. Third, the Lord will not forget our trials. And finally, we receive glory as we share in Christ’s glory (The Message of 1 Peter, 51-53).

We will go through trials, difficulties and suffering in this life. God uses these times to mold us into the image of Christ. And in times of trials we are to rejoice and to consider it pure joy because we know God is working all things for our good. We can either fight being “on the anvil”, or cooperate with God in the process.
The Discipline of Suffering

Paul begins Romans 5 with the wonderful truths of the gospel. Those who put their faith in Christ have been justified and have peace with God. We now stand in grace! We are to rejoice that we are in Christ through His grace. We rejoice in the hope of glory. Then, we rejoice even in our sufferings, for they will fulfill the purpose God desires in our lives. Paul states,

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Romans 5:1-5).

In his concluding remarks on Romans 5:1-5, Gary Thomas states, “We are asked to cooperate with God’s Spirit to forge lives of selflessness, compassion and love. This transformation is impossible apart from suffering. Don’t be so quick to reject the very thing that will most help you become mature” (Authentic Faith: The Power of Fire-tested Life, 84). Suffering is used by God to establish proven character. We are to persevere in suffering, difficulties and trials because it produces character. Perseverance assumes discomfort or pain. Suffering hurts. As Thomas states, “Character is forged only when we pass through the fire” (69).

Romans 5:3-5a can be charted as follows. It is a helpful and practical look at bedrock spiritual formation.

| Suffering → Perseverance |
| Perseverance → Character |
| Character → Hope |
| Hope → Never Disappointed |

The reality is not whether we will suffer. The question is how we will suffer and, more importantly, how we’ll respond. Paul encourages Timothy to “endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 2:3). We endure hardship because it produces character, and hope, and hope never disappoints us. On one hand we are not to look for suffering. But on the other hand, we are not to refuse suffering either.

Paul was no stranger to suffering. In writing to the church in Corinth he made the following references to hardship. “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life” (2 Corinthians 1:8). “Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses” (2 Corinthians 6:4).
On a personal note Paul states,

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

The Lord never makes it clear the nature of Paul's 'thorn in the flesh.'

The focus is not on the hardship, but what Paul learned from God, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul learned to serve out of his weaknesses, struggles and suffering. In regards to suffering, African believers have said, "We pray not that God will remove the burden but that God would strengthen our faith that we would be better able to bear the burden."

Paul provides two more lessons for us in the midst of suffering. Suffering does not make null and void God's assurance of His love. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?" (Romans 8:35) In a few verses Paul answers his own question: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:37). Any suffering we go through now cannot be compared to future glory. "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). We are called to be living monuments of God's grace. "We receive the grace of God each day and, knowing things are messy, knowing we're imperfect beings, we stand and show how God works through any and all of the circumstances in our lives. Even the messy ones" (Thomas, 82).

**Developing a Game Plan for Suffering**

In the book *The Hand of God*, Alistar Begg takes his readers through the life of Joseph and shows how Joseph found God's care in all circumstances. His main thesis is that God rules and overrules in the circumstances of life and uses these circumstances for our good, even out of what we view as our darkest moments. Begg gives four points for developing a game plan for suffering (90-99).

*Don't be surprised by suffering.* Peter tells us: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12). *Don't quit when you suffer*, but maintain your integrity even when you are tempted to give in. Third, *don't take revenge when you suffer*. We are tempted to take revenge, even though we know it is biblically wrong. As Paul states,

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In
doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:17-21).

And lastly, don’t miss the chance to help others. By God’s grace, we can turn unjust suffering into an opportunity to help others. “Are you in a dungeon at the moment? Are circumstances closing you down that are known only to you and to God? Turn your gaze outward toward others, and you will see those who need your help.” (Begg, 98)

**Is God in Control?**

The whole idea of trusting God in the midst of trials and hardships is based upon the fact that God is absolutely trustworthy. God is trustworthy because of His sovereignty, wisdom and love (Bridges. *Is God Really in Control?*, 127).

If God is in control, how do we respond to the trials of life? First we are instructed in the Word of God to respond with humility and trust. “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:6-7). Humility and trust are both a response and fruit to suffering.

As it was already noted we are called to “give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Giving thanks to God even for the trials is probably the highest illustration of trusting Him. Thanksgiving is the second response and an admission of our dependency upon God (Bridges, 137).

Bridges also suggests that responding to hardship involves practicing forgiveness and praying for deliverance, but above all else and in all circumstances our response to adversity should be to seek God’s glory. Paul demonstrated this attitude when it came to the preaching of the gospel. As he writes to the church in Philippi he is in prison, yet he sees his circumstances for the good of the church and the glory of Christ.

> “Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

> It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice” (Philippians 1:12-18).

> “Trusting God,” according to Bridges, “is worked out in an arena that has no boundaries. We do not know the extent, the duration, or the frequency of the painful, adverse circumstances in which we must frequently trust God. We are always coping with the unknown” (125).

How do you remain focused on God’s faithfulness in the midst of suffering and trials? The reality is each and every one of us will encounter suffering. Some more than
others—but we will all suffer! How will you respond? By the grace of God, we are empowered to respond to adversity with faith and trust.
How has God used trials, hardships and suffering to help you grow in Christ?

How does our response to adversity reflect our view of God and our faith in Him?

Review Romans 5:1-5. How can this passage help you grow through adversity rather than crumbling under it?

What did Paul learn from his personal suffering? What lesson does it have for us today?

Alistair Begg suggests a plan for developing a game plan for suffering. What are the key points? Identify a time of suffering or trials in your life. Describe it briefly, and then consider how you could have responded more biblically.

If God is in control and He is sovereign, wise and loving (merciful and gracious), how should we respond to the trials of life?
ACCOUNTABILITY

Describe how trials, hardships and difficulties make it hard for you to put your trust in God alone.

In response to this lesson, how do you need to grow in order to better trust God in the midst of difficulties.
MISSION

How can trials, hardships and difficulties in the life of non-believers provide an avenue for sharing the good news of Christ?

How can the truths of this lesson serve as springboard for sharing the gospel?

Who are the three people (non-church, non-believers) you are praying for?

1. ____________________________  
2. ____________________________  
3. ____________________________

Steps I have taken or will take to connect with them:

1. _____________________________________________  
2. _____________________________________________  
3. _____________________________________________
SUPPLICATION

Spend time praising God that He never abandons us in the midst of difficulties, and that He will use adversity to grow us in Christ.

Pray for your lost neighbors, friends, and family.

Pray for Village Seven to be effective in the mission God has given it.

What needs do you have that your group can be praying for?

What is one area of godliness that you can pray for each other about?