



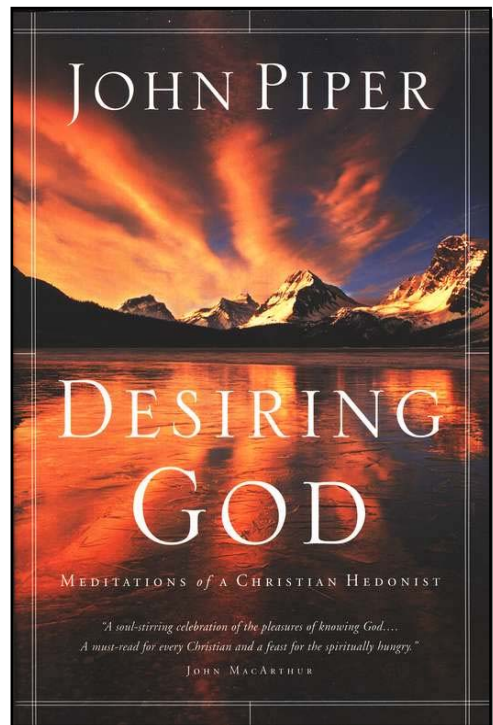
DEAN WELCH – TEACHER

where is GOD when **IT HURTS?**

WEEKLY SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

MAY 30, 2010

LESSON #9 FROM THE *MASTERWORK* SERIES STUDY OF:



where is GOD when **IT HURTS?**

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There was a young mother who had had a very tough day. Her appliances were breaking down, the doorbell wouldn't stop ringing, and bills arrived with no money to pay them. Feeling like she was at the breaking point, this young mom picked up her little son and put him in his high chair. She then dropped her head on the tray, and began to cry. The little boy watched his mom for a moment, then took the pacifier from his mouth and placed it in hers.

At times, we all feel just like that exasperated mom, don't we? The world we live in is sometimes overwhelming and we don't understand why pain and suffering come our way. So today, as we wrap up our 9-week study of John Piper's *Desiring God*, we are going to spend some time talking about suffering and its purpose. But first, will someone repeat our memory verse from **PSALM 37:4 (NIV)?** *"Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart."* **Delight and joy**—that's what our relationship with Jesus Christ should encompass, day in and day out. Now, will someone share a moment when you found **JOY** in God this week? And, as we've done each week, who will share one thing that **KEPT YOU FROM JOY** in God this week?

Life is hard! Nietzsche said, *"Whatever doesn't kill me only makes me stronger."* Picture this in your mind for a moment: WILE E. COYOTE furiously chases Roadrunner. The bird suddenly stops. The coyote tries to but can't, and he skids past the roadrunner out to the edge of a cliff. The ground gives way and for just a moment we see his saucer eyes. Then down Wile E. plummets. Poof! I love to watch old Roadrunner cartoons. Wile E. Coyote and I share a common plight. I, too, have ventured too close to the edge. I've found myself on shaky ground and taken a fall. I've stared that "oh-boy-this-is-gonna-hurt" stare. I've looked up from the bottom of the pit, dazed and stunned.

But Wile E. has something you and I don't. He's invincible. He never gets hurt. The falls don't faze him. In the next scene of the cartoon he's stacking Acme dynamite or painting a wall to make it appear like a tunnel. Within moments, he's out of the pit, back on the trail. You and I don't recover so easily. Like Wile E., we fall. But unlike Wile E., we wander in the pit for a while. Stunned, hurt ... and wondering if this ravine has a way out.

Unfortunately suffering is NORMAL for the Christian and if anybody tells you the opposite, they're flat out WRONG! Turn to **1 PETER 1: 6-7 (NLT)** and let's look at what Peter says about trials and suffering: *⁶So be truly glad! There is wonderful joy ahead, even though it is necessary for you to endure... [ugh, that's not a very comforting word and implies pain]... endure any trials for a while. ⁷These trials are only to test your faith, to show that it is strong and pure. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—and your faith is far more precious to God than mere gold. So if your faith remains strong after being tried by fiery trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.*

Do you ever think that suffering is GOOD for us? Duh! How many times have you thought to yourself in the middle of a trial or struggle how grateful you were for the struggle? *"Pour it on, LORD. I know this is for my own good."* To most people adversity, or suffering, is an enemy. Stop and think. Who ever thought of adversity as a friend? Or is it?

Let's look at what James says in his letter to his church in Jerusalem in **James 1:2-3 (NKJV)**: *²My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.* Listen to the same verse from The New Living Translation: *²Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. ³For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow.*

Or what about this paraphrase from Peterson's *The Message*:
²Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. ³You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. Now, continuing, let's look at the next few verses, picking up with **verse 3** from **JAMES 1 (3-4)**: *³For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. ⁴So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything.*

Notice the common thread running throughout all the translations. I think of the process as a domino effect. Trials and tests come that impact our patience and give it a chance to grow. As patience begins to develop, strong character is cultivated, moving us ever onward toward maturity. There is no shortcut!!! From these verses, we learn a great deal about trials and suffering.

Does suffering really make us stronger? Should it? How does God's demonstration of His faithfulness during our time of suffering increase your faith? *On April 16th, an armed rebel group kidnapped a Baptist pastor from his home in a remote village in Bangladesh. The group, called terrorists activists by locals, ransacked the pastor's church, throwing Bibles on the floor, seizing a mobile phone and taking the pastor to their leader's home. The pastor was allegedly beaten and taken to a Buddhist temple where he was told to deny his faith in Christ and believe and obey in Buddha. Later that day, two Christian men were taken by rebels to the Buddhist temple and released when they agreed to the rebels' demands. The men are now hiding to avoid further problems. The pastor remains inside the Buddhist temple where he is allowed to move about freely, but he is constantly surrounded by monks who are instructing him in their rituals and teachings. The villagers were told they would be shot dead if they involved the police.*

Remember the words from the old hymn: *"When through fiery trials my pathway shall lie, Thy grace all sufficient shall be my supply?"* Well fiery trials and ordeals aptly describe what most of

us must pass through at one time or another in life ... some, more frequently than that. Peter addresses Christians who are going through just such desperate circumstances: Look at **1 Peter 4:12-13 (MSG)**: [The Message says] *Friends, when life gets really difficult, don't jump to the conclusion that God isn't on the job. Instead, be glad that you are in the very thick of what Christ experienced. This is a spiritual refining process, with glory just around the corner.* Let's look at how Paul regarded suffering as we read his words in **PHILIPPIANS 1:29 (NIV)**, *²⁹For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.*

Both Paul and Peter knew extreme suffering, yet they still regarded it as a gift and God's will. Scriptures actually reveal that their sufferings were appointed by God... So, we get down to the nitty-gritty and our real question is WHY? Why did God appoint for Paul to suffer so much as the prototype of the frontier missionary? We may not remember what Paul went through for Christ, so turn to **2 CORINTHIANS 11: 23-28 (NIV)** and follow along as you are reminded again of what he experienced: *²³Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.*

In case you don't know what it meant to receive "forty lashes less one," let me explain so you'll see what Paul went through. It

meant that he was stripped and tied to some kind of stake so that he could not run or fall. Then a person trained in flogging would take a whip, maybe with or without shards in the leather, and lash Paul's back 39 times. Halfway through, or earlier perhaps, the skin would begin to break and tear. By the end, parts of Paul's back would be like jelly. The lacerations would not be clean, as with a razor blade. The skin would be torn and shredded, so that healing would be slow and perhaps complicated by infection. They knew nothing of sterilization in those days and had no antiseptics. It would take perhaps months before his clothes could hang on his back without pain. Now, with that in view, consider that this happened a second time on the same back, opening all the scars. It healed more slowly the second time. Then consider that some months later it happened a third time. Imagine what his back must have looked like. Then it happened again. And finally it happened a fifth time. And this was just ONE of Paul's sufferings. Now, that verse we just read from Philippians 1:29 is more powerful.

OK, back to the reasons. In our lesson, we learned that God wills that the mission of the church advance through storms and suffering. Why do you think that is? It's easy to give thanks when life is full of blessings, such as when we receive a promotion, exchange wedding vows, find the house of our dreams, or have our first child. During these periods of joy, our communication line to God can be overflowing with praise and thanksgiving. However, what about when life hurts—when we lose our job, experience the death of a loved one, or receive a shocking, life-threatening medical diagnosis? What then? How are we to react to these unstable, even tragic, times in our lives? Recall what Paul said in the midst of his suffering in prison? **PHILIPPIANS 4:4** says, *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"*

Esther learned that her mother and father had been arrested and she was angry with God and the Chinese communists. Then she prayed and realized her parents were honoring God with their sacrifice. Watch this interview with Esther talking about her

parents being arrested and persecuted for being Christians.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XADb_LxkEoM&feature=player_embedded

WOW! Is that the way we handle suffering and adversity in our lives here in the United States? Why? Turn to **PHILIPPIANS 3:7-11 (ESV)** and as I read I want you to listen for what Paul says was his loss and what was his gain: *⁷But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— ¹⁰that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*"

Suffering is tough and hard for us today in our society. We don't like it. When I went through my trials and suffering ten years ago, I thought I would be angry with God and deny Him and run away. I didn't. Because of my suffering then, and God's Hand restoring me, I stand before you today as His mouthpiece. I can truly identify with the words of Paul in **ROMANS 5: 3-5**, which say: *³Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that SUFFERING produces PERSEVERANCE; ⁴perseverance, CHARACTER; and character, HOPE. ⁵And hopes does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.*"

You may remember from Week One we said the bottom-line message of our 9-week study, according to John Piper, is *"God is most **glorified** in me when I am most **satisfied** in Him."* That's really the basis of what Piper calls *"Christian Hedonism."* And through our suffering, others will be able to see the true depth of our faith and love for Him and hopefully want to know our Savior!

A few years ago, I read a perfect example of both the REALITY and the RESULT of faith in God through suffering. Ridley Barron told the story in *Home Life* magazine of what happened on Good Friday, April 9, 2004, as he and his wife of 12 years, Sarah Ellen, and their three children were traveling back home in South Georgia from a vacation. Ridley was a pastor and church planter and on that day, as he and his wife were driving, they were talking about how much God had done in their lives and how excited they were to be moving in the coming month to a new community just outside of Nashville to start a new church, their second church planting. They were about 30 minutes from their house as Ridley asked Sarah Ellen to drive so he could work on some final points to his Easter sermon and do some more preparation for their upcoming move. About seven miles from their house, he heard Sarah Ellen exclaim, *"Oh, my word!"*

These would be the last words he ever heard her say. An SUV missed a stop sign and that mistake would forever change the future of his family. Sarah Ellen was killed instantly. He watched helplessly from the passenger's seat as she took her final breath while he pleaded with her not to leave him. The two older children, Harrison, age 9 at the time, and Abigail, age 6, came away with only bruises. Joshua, 17 months old, was flown to a regional hospital for more extensive care. He received a head injury from being thrown from the van while still in his car seat.

Five days later, Joshua died as the result of a pharmaceutical error. A pharmacist mistakenly gave Josh an adult dose of medication. In five days, Ridley Barron lost his best friend and his youngest child. He was forced to carry on with the responsibility of planting a new church, relocating his family and raising two children alone. A broken shoulder required him to spend the next four months sleeping in a recliner. He writes that this would be the place of the nightly battleground where he and God would have their nightly debates. He spent many a sleepless nights asking questions, challenging His plan, and reexamining every aspect of his faith.

Listen to these questions: *“Did I truly believe God was real? Was He all powerful? Why would this good God allow such an awful thing? If He was there, did He care at all about what I was going through?”*

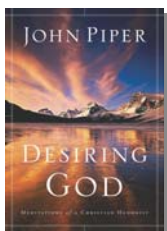
That was three years ago, he writes. His church in Douglas, Georgia, became a shining example of grace and love from the day of the accident until the day he moved away. He came to know God’s call to go to Nashville and plant another church was still true for him and his kids. Three months after the accident, he and his two children made the move to Franklin, Tennessee. Ridley says that he learned that faith is not real—and it’s not even yours—until it has carried you through the hardest of times and brought you out safely on the other side. He writes about the difficult lessons, struggles with depression and a stronger faith that has carried him through.

Listen to these words from Ridley Barron: *“The truth is, though, I don’t mourn for Sarah Ellen and Josh. I mourn for me. I’m the one who has to stay here on this earth. I know with all my heart that Sarah Ellen and Joshua are in the greatest place...They are where I long to be.”*

WOW! Now, that’s real faith, isn’t it—in full blown reality? How is he able to do that—to have that comfort and peace? We see here the REALITY of faith is a faith in God. And look at the impact of that faith and how he endured through the suffering. WOW!

“I count it all as joy when I fall into various trials...” Do you? Can you say, “Bring it on God?” Here I am, use me!

Let’s Pray.



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