

“WHERE IS GOD WHEN IT HURTS?”

DR. BRENT STRAWSBURG
CBASC APOLOGETIC CONSULTANT

Everywhere I go...every church I visit...I ultimately come face-to-face with people who have faced hurtful times where life didn't make sense and God seemed a million miles away! I talk to people...

- Who've lost a job...
- Faced a horrible illness...
- Faced reversals in finances...
- I've listened to people describe the loss of a loved one...
- I've watched people face the uncertainty & confusion over the future...
- Sometimes you just see in a person's face or hear in their voice that they are about to give up...it's just too much!

No one is immune to pain's touch...no one!

For many people these difficult seasons result in feeling increasingly distant from the Lord. We question His motives or His plan! Sometimes, we even find ourselves questioning His love or presence! Listen to the words of one of the most famous Christians of all-time, C.S. Lewis in the aftermath of his wife's death of bone cancer.

“Meanwhile, where is God?...When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, if you turn to Him then with praise, you will be welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away.”

Although Christians throughout the ages have faced the difficulties and disappointments of life...most modern-day churches don't prepare people for that moment. Most churches never give Christians the tools to face times of suffering & pain!

I believe with all my heart that we need tools in two distinct areas...

1st...We need tools to defend our faith in the face of skeptics and critics.

2nd...We also need the tools to cope with the emotional and spiritual upheaval.

This morning I am going to share with you five reasons for why God allows hardship, pain & struggle into the life of the Christian.

- They may not be the reasons for what you are going through in your life right now.
- They will not answer every question you have for God nor will they remove your emotional heartache.

However, I believe it's reassuring to know that God has left us reminders—reasons that are scattered throughout the Word of God. He has left us reminders! I believe each of these reasons are lovingly left to remind us “I'm with you...I have a purpose for this season in your life!”

So let's look at these reasons together...

REASON #1...GOD MAY ALLOW HURTFUL TIMES TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PURPOSES

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”
Genesis 50:20 NIV

Like us, Joseph lived in a fallen world...a world where the evil choices and circumstances of the world have a way of landing on our front porch. Allow me to make a very important point...very important!

When God created a world full of people who have free choice there existed the possibility that some people would use that free choice for evil!

Think about it...this is exactly what the account of Genesis says. Joseph clearly said to his brothers, "You intended to harm me". God didn't cause Joseph's brothers to hate him or to sell him into slavery. They were the choices by flawed people within the sphere of Joseph's life. However, it is also very clear that in His ultimate wisdom God decided to use some very tragic and unfair things for a greater purpose within the life of Joseph.

Here's the tricky part...we don't always see....

- How God will use something in the future or how He desires to use us!
- How other people who will be touched by our experience or the events!
- How God's character or His power will be demonstrated through difficult events!
- How our life might be used as a leverage for something great...

God has the capacity to use hurtful times to accomplish something truly great inside of you or around you!

REASON #2...GOD MAY ALLOW HURTFUL TIMES TO REMOVE OUR SELF-SUFFICIENCY

*⁷ 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.
2 Corinthians 12:7 NIV*

We are never told the identity of "Paul's thorn in the flesh"! However, there was something in his physical body that wasn't pleasant...it was painful...it was annoying...it was confusing! However, there seemed to be a purpose for it! It was designed to keep Paul from having an elevated perception of himself. It was designed to keep his feet on the ground. It was designed to remind him that "God was in control even if he wasn't".

- Sometimes...God uses the bumps in the road of an imperfect world to keep us "awake" as we doze off at the wheel!
- Sometimes...God uses the turns and corners and steep hills of our path in life to urge us to nestle ourselves as close as we can to our heavenly Father!

Difficulties, trials and pain reminds us that we must ultimately rely on God. As C.S. Lewis described it...

"pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world"

REASON #3...GOD MAY ALLOW HURTFUL TIMES TO DEVELOP OUR FAITH

*⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ 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 1:6,7 NIV*

As you first read this verse it's human nature to see if we might be able to find some "wiggle room". After all, no one wants to go through trials! No one wants to have hardship or difficulties! Well, I don't want to rain on your parade but there is no "wiggle room" in these verses. Listen very carefully to verse 6 as I read from the New American Standard....

*even though now for a little while, if necessary,
you have been distressed by various trials,
1 Peter 1:6,7 NASB*

Notice it says..."if necessary" you have been distressed by various trials. In Greek, the expression "if necessary" should literally be translated "if necessary, as it is". It's not just telling us that we live in an imperfect world...it's saying that God has placed us in an imperfect world because He values the growth of our faith. Here's the idea...hurtful times...difficult times...disappointing times are part of the natural development in our spiritual life...they are absolutely necessary... not fun... not enjoyable...but necessary!

We often long dreamily for days without difficulty, but God knows better. The easier our life, the weaker our spiritual fiber. Strength can only grow by exertion.

Folks, we must embrace all the experiences of our life—not just the good and happy ones but the bad ones, the shameful ones, the wrong ones, and the sad ones. Maybe your parents weren't that great, maybe you weren't that hot in school, maybe you have faced a lot of tough times, hurtful times! I'm deeply sorry for those times of pain in your life! Many of us have a human tendency to run away from our past...DON'T! God can use every experience in your life for good, but you've got to stop running from them. You have to embrace your experiences. Own them! Learn from them!

Don't let the bad things in life destroy you! Don't let them define you! Let them develop you!

#4 GOD MAY ALLOW HURTFUL TIMES SO THAT WE CAN COMFORT OTHERS

³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. ⁵For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 NIV

In the space of a handful of verses, the Apostle Paul uses the Greek word "comfort" 10 times. The word "comfort" means much more than mere sympathy. It communicates the idea of one person standing alongside another to encourage and support his friend. It pictures for us someone who is willing to stand with a person until a particular need is met!

I've observed that during traumatic events in our life or during difficult seasons, one of the most universal experiences is that people don't feel or sense God's presence or comfort. Sometimes God seems distant! Sometimes God seems uncaring! By His unwillingness to tell us why everything is happening in our lives, we are tempted to wonder whether or not He truly is a God of comfort.

History reminds us that God does indeed care...the painful steps of Jesus in this world give ample testimony to how much He cares. God cares...He took suffering upon Himself. He was willing to go through the same kind of unfair world & experiences that each of us experience. But that's not all! Part of God's master plan to prove to people that He actually cares is to create in us a desire and life-experience so that we can demonstrate care for people who are going through hurt & suffering! In other words, God wants you to be His agents to care for people in our world!

Listen to Philip Yancey, this time as he addresses our role as God's agents of comfort...

"This plan of the body meshes with the way God is working in the world. Sometimes He does enter in, occasionally performing miracles, often giving supernatural strength to those in need. But mainly He relies on us, His agents, to do His work in the world. We announce His message, work for justice, pray for mercy...and suffer with the sufferers. We are to comfort each other and bring healing; by doing so, we will be recognized as Christ's body..."

Philip Yancey, Where is God When it Hurts

You are now God's agent to bring comfort...it's God's ministry for your life!

You can take your worst moments and transform another person's life!

REASON #5...GOD MAY ALLOW HURTFUL TIMES TO BRING US CLOSER TO HIM

²"I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. ³You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. ⁴"You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' ⁵My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you..."

Job 42:1-5 NIV

We all remember the horrific story that was the OT character of Job. For a protracted period of time...everything bad that could happen did! No answers from God; no explanations...nothing! There came a point when Job was finally content to live in a world where he wasn't going to get all the answers to his "whys"! There came a point when he actually received something much better than answers---He caught a glimpse of God Himself! For the first time in this incredibly painful season in his life—Job experienced the presence of God—He saw God in a way that changed His perspective on everything!

This may be one of the most difficult lessons for any of us to learn—after all, it's human nature to ask "why"! Our pain seems to cry out for closure where we want some kind of explanation. However, God is eager for something else! He wants our pain to draw us closer to Him. He wants us to connect with the Lord on the deepest level possible. He wants us to come to Him in our brokenness because He has promised to give "grace to the brokenhearted".



Allow me to finish this morning by looking at two life-principles that I hope will guide your path whenever you face the challenges of living in an imperfect world—full of difficulty, disappointment, delay or despair. Sometimes it's how you look at life that really makes all the difference. Sometimes the lens or perspective that you bring to life helps you get through these hard seasons. Here's the first life principle...

LIFE PRINCIPLE #1
GOD'S DESIGNED OUR FUTURE TO BE CONCEALED

*¹³ Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked? ¹⁴ When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future.
Ecclesiastes 7:13-14 NIV*

Solomon understood that it is human nature to ask "Why?" He understood that many times we would like to lift up the curtain on the future and sneak a peek! But don't miss what this passage is saying...God's hidden our future because He's compassionate...knowing all the details of our future would, without a doubt, be very harmful to us...think about it!

- ◆ **Knowing all the good in our future would remove the joy of discovery...**
- ◆ **Knowing all the bad in our future would totally overwhelm us and terrify us...**



LIFE PRINCIPLE #2
GOD'S DESIGNED LIFE TO BE LIVED IN HIS SHADOW

*Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them".... ⁶ Remember him—before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well, ⁷ and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.
Ecclesiastes 12:1,6-7 NIV*

The author of Ecclesiastes intentionally begins to describe the later years in a person's life when a person's physical body is breaking down.

- The days of trouble refer to the difficulties inherent in old age...
- The "silver cord" that holds a bowl breaks, the bowl crashes to the floor and the light goes out...picturing death!
- The unavailability of water is another picture of death!
- Finally, the dust returns to the ground indicating the ultimate reality of death!

Ultimately, everything we do is done in the shadow of the Almighty!

- Everything we do should be done before an audience of one...
- Everything we do should be done with the realization that eternity is potentially just around the corner...
- Everything we do should be done knowing that we must give account of our lives before the Creator...

George Bernard Shaw expressed it...

"Life is no brief candle to me, it is a sort of splendid torch which I've got a hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."