



Digging Deeper

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Patience in Suffering

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I hate pain. I try to avoid suffering, and I don't go out of my way to look for affliction. But pain, suffering, and affliction find me. They find all of us. If you are free of these things, brace yourself and be patient. All you have to do is live long enough. Suffering and affliction are human conditions. And when suffering and affliction come, be patient, remembering that God is sovereign.

And thank God that He is sovereign over suffering, using affliction first for His glory and secondarily for our good. But that doesn't mean we have to like it, nor is patience easy in the face of suffering and pain.

But, remember, the important things in life are generally formed over time. The strongest tools are forged by the hottest fires. The most beautiful artistic expressions take the most energy and care to create. So it is with the beautiful thing called "holiness." It is not achieved quickly, or without effort, or in the absence of pain. In our instant society, much to our disappointment, there is no such thing as "microwave holiness." Metaphors abound.

God is described by Jeremiah as a potter, and we are described as clay (Jer. 18). The most pliable clay is that which has been most thoroughly mixed, beaten, rolled, and, finally, pushed and pulled on the wheel. Only then the potter, with care and patience, begins to pull and shape the clay into something beautiful. But it is painful to be pulled and drawn into a new shape. Do you feel pulled in every direction, drawn thin and fragile, left out to dry, placed in a fire of unimaginable heat? The Potter is having His way with the clay, and the vessel He makes will be beautiful in His hands.

God may be seen as a weaver, creating in us individually and corporately a breathtaking tapestry of His glory. But the design only begins to take shape after the threads have been spun, wound, spooled, and drawn through the warp. Only then is the thread thrown through the woof and beaten by the bar into a tightly knit design. Do you feel like life spins around you, like you are being thrown and beaten? The Weaver has His way with the cloth, but the resulting fabric promises to be a stunning display of glory.

In John's gospel, God is portrayed as a vinedresser, cultivating His vineyard to maximize His harvest (John 15). But the cultivation of grapes requires pruning the vines, pulling the dead brush away to be burned, tying the branches up to allow growth and nurture. Only after this grueling process may the vine achieve its potential of rich and satisfying fruit. Do you feel like

parts of your life are being cut off, pulled away, burned up? Do you feel like God's hand is personally tying you to a wire? The Vinedresser will have His way with His field and the harvest will be succulent and rich. The writer of Hebrews says, "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (12:11).

Joni Eareckson Tada writes of God as a painter, a master artist. She says that, along with the bright colors, "God brings the cool, dark contrast of suffering into your life. That contrast, laid up against the golden character of Christ within you, will draw attention ... to Him. Light against darkness. Beauty against affliction. Joy against sorrow" (Glorious Intruder, p. 158). Is God bringing dark shades into the portrait of your life? The light of Christ in His children is made more manifest to the world through the dark colors of suffering, borne through patient endurance.

James tells us that trials and testing develop perseverance resulting in maturity and wisdom: "You know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (1:3-5). In J.R.R. Tolkien's massive legend The Lord of the Rings, made popular again by the recent films, we see a subtle example of this hard truth. In The Silmarillion, the story before the story, Tolkien speaks of the creator of Middle Earth, Iluvatar, and the process of creation. Of the race of Elves, we read: "Though the beauty of the Quendi was beyond all other beauty that Iluvatar has caused to be . . . sorrow and wisdom have enriched it." Do you see it? The Elves in Tolkien's legend are portrayed as most beautiful. But these qualities are magnified and enriched by sorrow.

Affliction and suffering have been appointed by God as instruments He uses to make us more holy, to make us more like Jesus. They remind us that we are weak and we must rely not on ourselves, but on Jesus. They remind us that this world is not our home but that we are only passing through toward our real home in heaven with our Father, our Savior, Jesus Christ, and our Comforter, the Holy Spirit.

The Scriptures say that we are the height of God's creation, made in His image (Gen. 1:26-27). Affliction and sorrow – almost never brief, almost always difficult – are necessary elements in our Creator's hand to bring His people, over time, to a place of wisdom, joy, and holiness. Though we are often impatient to get to the destination, the deeper the affliction and sorrow, the greater the wisdom, joy, and holiness at journey's end.

