

SERIES: DO YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE?

PART 8C: I AM AFFLICTED

Jesus was very clear on the issue of suffering. If you surrender your life to Him and your desire is to become like Him, in this life you will suffer. To suffer means to feel pain or distress. It means to tolerate or endure evil, injury or death. To suffer can mean to appear to be at a disadvantage. To suffer can mean to experience loss either spiritually or emotionally or relationally or mentally or physically. In Matthew 5:10-12 Jesus says, **“God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. ¹¹God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are My followers. ¹²Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way.”** We worship Jesus who left His home in heaven and came to earth and suffered and was deeply afflicted. Throughout the Scriptures and the history of the church, those who have committed themselves to Jesus’ purposes most faithfully have suffered most painfully. It is important that you and I come to grips with the fact that loving, serving and living for Jesus means we will experience pain, distress, discomfort, and even evil, and the sooner you come to terms with this truth and accept it the sooner you can learn, grow and mature from the affliction that comes your way every day. Part of growing up and maturing in our souls is to know that things often will be difficult. If you are

married, it will be difficult. You have two flawed imperfect human beings living together. If you have children, it will be stressful to always remember that they are God's children who have been given to us on loan to teach them how to receive God's love and then to love, value, sacrifice and serve Him with their lives. Even in your day-to-day activities, you will be challenged spiritually, emotionally, relationally, financially, vocationally, intellectually, and physically many times in a day. I have observed in my 64 years of living that many of us don't think that our lives should be as difficult as they often are. If you fight it, resist it and believe it shouldn't be this way, you will develop an anger, frustration, resentment, bitterness, and even hatred towards God. In my last two teachings we looked at how to understand suffering and how to grow through it. I looked at with you the 11 different possible sources of the affliction and suffering you can experience. I continue to encourage you to attend your small group and work through these issues together. I am seeing people's lives change simply because they are identifying where their pain and suffering is coming from, and it is helping them to see why it is happening and often times what actions they can take to better deal with it. All our suffering comes to us because we live in a sinful world and everything is broken. Nothing really works like it should for a long period of time. Much of the suffering most of us experience comes from the consequences of our poor choices, and they can also come from the fact that we're being disciplined by our loving Father, and much of our suffering is meant to be preventative.

So, to close this topic concerning, **“Do You Know Who You Are?”**, and the role affliction and suffering has in your life, I want to look at, **“How to Respond When You Suffer.”** In other words **What actions can you take so you don’t simply wallow in your pain?** I find that is what many of us do, and we take on the personality of a victim. The attitude of a victim has taken a very destructive role in our culture, and, as Christians, God wants you to model how to respond to the everyday suffering that we all encounter. Please follow along as I read the passage that we have looked at for the last three weeks we have been studying this topic of how affliction and suffering are a part of our identity as a daughter and son of God. Ephesians 3:1-13, **“When I think of all this, I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the benefit of you Gentiles . . .**²**assuming, by the way, that you know God gave me the special responsibility of extending His grace to you Gentiles.**³**As I briefly wrote earlier, God Himself revealed His mysterious plan to me.**⁴**As you read what I have written, you will understand my insight into this plan regarding Christ.**⁵**God did not reveal it to previous generations, but now by His Spirit He has revealed it to His holy apostles and prophets.**⁶**And this is God’s plan: Both Gentiles and Jews who believe the Good News share equally in the riches inherited by God’s children. Both are part of the same body, and both enjoy the promise of blessings because they belong to Christ Jesus.**⁷**By God’s grace and mighty power, I have been given the privilege of serving Him by spreading this Good News.**⁸**Though I am the least deserving of all God’s people, He graciously gave me the privilege of telling the Gentiles about the**

endless treasures available to them in Christ. ⁹I was chosen to explain to everyone this mysterious plan that God, the Creator of all things, had kept secret from the beginning. ¹⁰God's purpose in all this was to use the church to display His wisdom in its rich variety to all the unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹This was His eternal plan, which He carried out through Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹²Because of Christ and our faith in Him, we can now come boldly and confidently into God's presence. ¹³So please don't lose heart because of my trials here. I am suffering for you, so you should feel honored."

I want to use the acronym SUFFER to communicate six action steps we can assimilate into our daily lives to respond in a healthy and successful way to all the different afflictions and sufferings that we experience every day as we live our lives for God's glory and His Kingdom purposes.

Seek God for the what instead of the why

Whenever we get discouraged with the difficulties of our lives and the affliction, pain and suffering, all too often we question whether God really loves us and cares for us, and we begin to question His authority, power and purpose for our lives. Often, you can be prone to believe in God's sovereignty while doubting His goodness. The result of this kind of thinking is you view God as distant, cold and that He won't comfort us. Others can lean towards doubting God's sovereignty while believing in His goodness. The result of

this kind of thinking is a false view of God that doesn't want you to suffer, but He is powerless to stop it. The problem with these two aberrant thoughts is when you question either God's sovereignty or His goodness you're left without a sense of His presence and His love, care and purpose for your life, because your pain distorts your perspective of who God is.

The Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, reveals that God is all-powerful, ever-present and all-knowing and that He is good, forgiving, merciful, and His love is eternal and unconditional. This means that, for those of us who have surrendered our lives to Jesus, everything in our lives including our affliction, suffering and pain either comes from Him or He allows it in our lives. Father God uses our suffering for our good, even it is was intended for evil. This is exactly what Paul meant when he stated in Romans 8:28, **“And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them.”** This is also exactly what Joseph said in Genesis 50:20 to his brothers who sought to destroy him: **“You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position, so I could save the lives of many people.”** One of the best examples of God allowing devastation and then restoring his life to a place that he had never experienced before was Job. His friends only understood suffering as God's punishment because of a person's sin. Rather than being able to comfort him, they judged and rebuked him unjustly. Suffering, affliction and pain isn't neat, tidy or systematic. Life is often

more complex than clear. This is why it is so important to guard your heart and mind from letting anger, bitterness, disbelief, depression, and disappointment with God set in by seeking God for what He is developing, growing and maturing in you rather than seeking an answer to why is this happening. “Why?” will only infuriate you; it will not help you. God is more concerned about my character, like Job, than He is my comfort. He sees things in my life that need attention. When we seek God for the “what” are You desiring to accomplish in me, rather than “why” are You letting this happen, it will lead us to a deeper trust, faith and intimacy with God. **Seek God for the ‘What’ instead of the ‘Why.’**

Unleash your faith to not give up

It is very easy to become disappointed and discouraged and want to give up because we’re confused why it is happening, and we can begin to doubt God’s character, purpose and plan for our lives. What we know is that God is good, He loves us eternally, He forgives us, and He blesses our lives with His grace. But sometimes you’re tempted to give up because your faith in God doesn’t seem to be working because you are in such deep pain, suffering and affliction. It is true that your faith in Jesus won’t prevent you from experiencing difficulties, but it can empower you to endure whatever you’re facing with and by God’s grace, for His glory and for your good. One example we have in this passage where Paul unleashed his faith which allowed him not to give up is found in vv. 1 and 13. Paul writes, **“When I think of all this, I, Paul a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the benefit of you**

Gentiles...". This is amazing, church. That Paul would suffer for the sake of Jesus Christ was emblazoned in his heart from the moment Jesus revealed Himself to Him. In Acts chapter 9 Saul, who later is referred to as Paul, was confronted by a light that shone down around him causing him to fall to the ground. He heard Jesus' voice "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting Me?" This experience left Paul blind for three days. Then the Lord spoke to one of His disciples, Ananias, in a vision telling him exactly where He wanted him to go and find Saul and pray for him so that he might regain his sight back. Ananias didn't want to do it because he had heard how ruthless Saul had been to Christians. Jesus said to Ananias, **"Go, for Saul is My chosen instrument to take My message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. ¹⁶And I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."** (Acts 9:15-16) From the very get go Saul, now Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians says in vs. 12-13, **"Because of Christ and our faith in Him, we can now come boldly and confidently into God's presence. ¹³So please don't lose heart because of my trials here. I am suffering for you, so you should feel honored."** How can you respond, dear friend, to the difficulties and to the fiery trials that are going on in your life right now? Unleash your faith to know that God is using you for His glory, honor and purposes, and commit to putting your trust and faith in Him and refuse to give up. 1 Peter 1:6-7 says, **"There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you have to endure many trials for a little while. ⁷These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than**

mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.”

Fulfill God’s purposes for His glory

Paul suffered because others sinned against him, not for any sin he committed. The Roman Emperor Nero placed Paul in prison, but ultimately Paul knew that Jesus Christ the King of kings reigned above Nero. As Paul suffered, his mind was consumed with his representation of his King Jesus and His Kingdom purposes. During his suffering he focused on his Suffering Savior. The key to understanding Paul is his phrase, “The prisoner of Christ Jesus.” He wore this like a badge. He was a victim but a victor because of Jesus Christ. As you go on daily with your life you must learn to think deeply about Jesus’ suffering, so you don’t waste your suffering, but rather use it for God’s glory and honor. Jesus didn’t suffer so that we wouldn’t have to suffer; He suffered so that when we do suffer, we can become more like Him and point more people to Him. In vv. 10-11 Paul writes, “God’s purpose in all this was to use the church to display His wisdom in its rich variety to all the unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.¹¹ This was His eternal plan, which He carried out through Christ Jesus our Lord.” Paul writes in Romans 8:29 what God’s purpose is for you and how you bring Him glory. “For God knew His people in advance, and He chose them to become like His Son, so that His Son would be the

firstborn among many brothers and sisters.” You bring glory to God as you allow the suffering, pain, affliction, and difficulties to mature and grow you into the character and person of Jesus Christ. When Jesus Christ comes back to earth to get His family, He will be the supreme Son of God among the countless number of sons and daughters of God. 1 Peter 2:21-24 sums up perfectly what it looks like to bring glory to God in your suffering and the key to doing so. **“²¹For God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in His steps. ²²He never sinned, nor ever deceived anyone. ²³He did not retaliate when He was insulted, nor threaten revenge when He suffered. He left His case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly. ²⁴He personally carried our sins in His body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By His wounds you are healed.”** The key to bringing glory and honor in our suffering is to model what Jesus did in verse 23. **“He left His case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly.”**

Foresee that affliction makes our suffering meaningful

When Paul faced suffering and affliction, instead of asking, “Why me, Lord?,” he asked, “Who?,” namely, “Who am I in Jesus Christ, and whose life will be transformed because of my witness and influence in their lives?” Loved ones, please hear me. I am so thankful for the first 25-30 years of my life which I lived a good portion of it in depression. My depression was a combination of living in a home where I

didn't learn my identity in Christ, and, through a lot of the emotional pain, I felt so worthless that it led me to true despair and hopelessness. Because I was taught by my parents and the church that it was inappropriate to try to anesthetize my pain through sex, drugs, alcohol, and the other means people used to mask their pain, I lived completely alive to my pain. As I look back, I am so thankful for that. First it taught me how to live in and through pain. Secondly, I can't tell you how many people who have come to me for Biblical guidance will say during and after our time together, "It is amazing how you seem to understand well my pain, suffering and affliction." I can say in all honesty, "Yes, I do," a good portion of the time. Why? Because God wants to use the experience of trauma, trials and testings to influence and impact others for Jesus Christ. I have no greater joy than to watch a person, a family, a marriage transform because of their faith in Jesus Christ and some of the lessons and biblical truth I can pass on to them because I have been through it. What is it that you are struggling with today? What is the pain? What is the fear, the anger, the rage, the hopelessness, despair or any other negative situation and pain? I promise you this, if you will surrender your life, pain, suffering, and affliction to Jesus Christ because He is truly the only One who knows what you're going through, He will help you through it and then use the experience of your pain to help other people learn to put their trust in Jesus. This is the vision that Jesus wants you to see and learn to cultivate in your own life. Once you can train your mind and emotions to foresee that whatever it is your going through, your suffering will

have profound meaning in it, because it will you cause you to grow and mature, and you will be able to help someone else.

Explore how suffering actually helps us to grow spiritually

When we are afflicted and we suffer, we have a divine appointment to learn three things about affliction that help us grow and mature as a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ.

1) We can learn a deeper understanding of how humble and gracious God is to serve us as our Suffering Servant, Jesus Christ. Jesus who is God came to us—not in glory, but in humility to serve, not to be served. This truth when you grasp it and allow your mind and thoughts to reflect deeply on it will revolutionize your ability to accept and embrace your suffering, so you will allow the deep hurt and pain to draw you closer to Jesus and create a deeper desire to serve others in Jesus' name.

2) We learn to better love and appreciate those who serve us. We have a chance to discover just how deep some people's love for us truly is when we are hurting, needy and inconvenient. Those who reflect the character of Jesus to us most clearly become the greatest gifts in our season of suffering.

3) As we allow Jesus and others to serve us in our own suffering and affliction, we learn new ways to serve those who suffer. It is too easy to become consumed with our own lives and become callous to the needs of others. It is through suffering, pain and hardship that God teaches us to open our hearts, eyes, and finances to meet the needs of others who are afflicted.

Realize that suffering increases your credibility

When we are afflicted and suffer we have a unique credibility to speak about difficult subjects in a way that helps bring healing and life to others facing the same suffering and hardships. We have seen this happen in countless hundreds of people who have come through our Celebrate Recovery ministry—persons who have been sexually abused, physically abused or they have become sober from drugs, alcohol and inappropriate sexual acting out. Much of our suffering—especially from consequences—comes from our own immaturity and our deep desire to control our own lives and others. The more we try to control the more broken we become. When people witness that you have allowed the suffering to break you in such a way that you have become humble, submitted and surrendered to Jesus Christ, it increases your credibility and earns you a right to speak to have other people want to learn what you have experienced. One of the most incredible verses on this topic has to do with Jesus in Hebrews 2:10: **“God, for Whom and through Whom everything was made, chose to bring many children into glory. And it was only right that He should make Jesus, through His suffering, a perfect leader, fit to bring them into their salvation.”** Jesus did not suffer for His own salvation, because He was God in human form. His perfect obedience, which led Him down the road of suffering, demonstrates that He was the complete sacrifice for us. Through suffering, Jesus completed the work necessary for our own salvation. Our suffering, if we respond as I have suggested in using the acronym SUFFER—it will make you

more sensitive as a servant of God. People who know pain can reach out with compassion to others who hurt. If you have suffered, ask God how your experience can be used to help others. Let's pray.