

UNIT FIVE: SUFFERING & PERSECUTION

KEY SCRIPTURE VERSE FOR UNIT FIVE

Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. - 1 Peter 4:1-2

CLASS 1: GODLY SUFFERING

1 Reading, 1 Exercise

Believers will encounter hardships and trials as we follow Jesus. We share in some aspects of Christ's sufferings but not all suffering is for righteousness sake.

CLASS 2: TRIALS, TESTINGS, & TRIBULATION

1 Reading, 1 Exercise

Various types of trials stretch our faith and prove how firmly established our hearts are in the Lord.

CLASS 3: SOVEREIGNTY & THORNS

1 Reading, 1 Exercise

There are certain types of suffering that Christians do not have to accept as part of God's sovereign plan for them and others that cannot be avoided.

CLASS 4: PERSECUTION TO THE END

1 Scripture Reading, 1 Exercise

Scripture guarantees that we will all be persecuted for truly following Jesus. Believers must be prepared to stand in faith until the return of Christ.

KEY QUESTIONS

GROUP EXERCISES

GODLY SUFFERING – FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

Every trial we face as followers of Christ is about one thing – it is a test of whether we really believe that God loves us and that His plans for us are good. Every time things happen in our lives which could cause us to doubt God's love for us in Christ, it is a new opportunity to believe afresh that Jesus truly is who He says He is, that His sacrifice was sufficient for all that we face, and that He will faithfully fulfill everything that He has promised. Undoubtedly, all of us will endure all sorts of suffering in our lives. However, when we hear the heart of God asking us through these trials and the pain *Do you believe that I am good?, Do you believe that I love you?, Do you believe that I am enough?, Do you believe what I have promised you?, and Do you believe that I have finished it?*, let us keep our eyes on Jesus and our minds on heaven and resoundingly answer back to Him, Yes!

We serve a King who came willingly to lay down His life as a sacrifice to God so that we could be with Him for eternity. Now, He tells us to go and do likewise by offering ourselves to God unreservedly.

*Romans 12:1: Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, **to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice**, holy and pleasing to God--**this is your true and proper worship**. (Consider also 2Timothy 2:10.)*

This said, I am not writing this to encourage anybody to recklessly throw themselves in the face of danger, and I certainly do not want to inspire any martyr complexes. Rather, it is important for all of us as Christ followers to be prepared and strengthened to follow Him to the fullest, no matter the cost.

DIFFERENT PURPOSE

Before we go even one step further, let us clarify one major difference between Jesus' suffering and ours.

Jesus is the only One appointed by God who could ever suffer and die for our sins and accomplish God's plan of salvation. You and I cannot suffer and die to pay for the sins of ourselves or others and our wounds, blood, or death have no sacrificial atoning value. God appointed Jesus exclusively for this task, and He completed it. He knew the will of God from the foundation of the earth.

*Hebrews 10:14: For **by one sacrifice** he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. (Consider also Hebrews 9:27-28.)*

*Revelation 13:8: All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast--all whose names have not been written in the Lamb's book of life, **the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world**.*

Moreover, our commission is slightly different than Christ's. Jesus came the first time to provide the way of salvation through faith in Him. Now, as His followers, He sends us out to tell everyone about God's salvation through Jesus Christ. Even though our task is slightly different than His, our purpose is similar enough to His that we can expect to face the same type of opposition He faced. Fortunately, the way He endured through trials gave us an example of righteousness and love in the face of the most horrific antagonism.

*John 15:18-21: If the world hates you, **keep in mind that it hated me first**. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you:*

'A servant is not greater than his master.' *If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me.*

1Peter 4:1: Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin.

1Peter 2:21: To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

Ok, now that we've clarified this, we can keep going.

SUFFERING FOR DOING RIGHT

Jesus was without sin, He always spoke the truth, and His life was a demonstration of perfect love. Therefore, He was not crucified for being a bad person, for deceit or trickery, or because He deserved it. He came to carry out God's fore-ordained purpose for Him, and He laid down His life in perfect submission to God and without rebellion against the God-appointed religious leaders or the governing powers in the world. Accordingly, He did not suffer for doing wrong but for doing right.

In contrast, we will be far more likely to do wrong things than Jesus. When we do wrong, we may suffer the consequences of our own wrong choices. However, suffering for doing wrong, making bad choices, or rebelling against authority is not the same as suffering for doing right.

*Galatians 6:7-8: Do not be deceived: **God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.***

*1Peter 2:19-20: For it is commendable if someone bears up under **the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God.** But how is it to your credit if you **receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it?** But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, **this is commendable before God.** (Also, 1Peter 3:17.)*

*1Peter 4:15, 19: **If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.** ... So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and **continue to do good***

Furthermore, unless the governing authorities demand that we renounce our faith in Christ in order to submit to them or to their laws, we cannot use our faith as an excuse for breaking the law. For example, even though He is the King who appoints all kings and the Son of the God who dwelt in the Temple, Jesus paid taxes to Caesar and He paid the Temple tax. (See Matthew 22:21, 17:24-27; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25.) Jesus did not have to do these things but He did them willingly in order to not offend the governing authorities or incite any form of doctrinal rebellion. He did not come to start a political or religious insurgence but to usher in the Kingdom of God. The same is true for us.

*Romans 13:1: Let everyone **be subject to the governing authorities,** for there is no authority except that which God has established. The **authorities that exist have been established by God.***

*1Peter 2:13-14: **Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority:** whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.*

Moreover, Jesus' suffering was not due to following some perverse religious teaching or subjecting Himself to pain in order to win God's favor. Jesus suffered out of selfless love for God and for us.

All of this is to say that, when we encounter various forms of suffering in our lives, not all suffering is suffering for righteousness. If we are truly sharing in Christ's sufferings, it will be due to our obedience to God. This said, as we offer ourselves to God for His Kingdom and purposes, He will inevitably lead us into sharing in the sufferings of Jesus, which is suffering for righteousness.

*1Peter 4:13: But rejoice inasmuch as you **participate in the sufferings of Christ**, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*

CHRIST'S EXAMPLE FOR US IN TRIALS

Jesus responded righteously to every trial He faced. He did so because He lived by the abiding direction of the Holy Spirit which always led Him in the will of God. Now that the Holy Spirit dwells in us, He guides us through our trials so we can learn to respond like Jesus. Here, in chronological order, are some examples of the trials Jesus faced and how He victoriously endured through them with God as our example.

Murder at Birth: From the time Jesus was born, the governing authorities of this world and God's people wanted Him dead. (See Matthew 2.) When they heard that a King was born in Israel, they sought to exterminate Him so they could retain control and power for themselves. God warned Jesus' parents in a dream and they escaped to Egypt for a time.

For us, as we are "birthed" into faith in Jesus and/or begin to follow Him in greater ways, we will often face natural or spiritual attacks. At the outset of our newfound faith or at the commencement of new "seasons" in our life and with Him, it can seem like the forces of this world conspire against what God has commissioned us to do. There may be times when God leads us to flee from things which can hinder or destroy God's work in our lives or to remain hidden for a time for our own protection.

Submission & Waiting for God's Timing: At age twelve, Jesus was ready to begin ministry. He had perfect character because God's nature was in Him and He already had wisdom which confounded the religious authorities. (See Luke 2:41-52.) However, it was not yet time for Jesus to begin His ministry and instead, He went home with His parents and submitted Himself to them. For the next eighteen years, Jesus waited patiently for the time God ordained for Him to begin His ministry without rebellion against the religious authorities or their teachings.

For us, there will be times when we have to wait for God and His timing. Things He has spoken to our hearts are not for us to fulfill in our own strength or strategies and we have to learn to wait upon the Lord for His promises to us to be fulfilled in His way and in His timing. As such, waiting upon the Lord is one of the most important expressions of our devotion to God and our submission to His will over our own desires. It proves through our actions that we are functioning by the nature of Jesus who submitted Himself and not by the nature of the evil one who exalted himself. Moreover, it is during these times when we must remain in submission to the authorities which God has appointed to rule over us. If God has truly called us to greatness then as we submit ourselves to Him, He will exalt us in due time.

*1Peter 5:5-6: In the same way, you who are younger, **submit yourselves to your elders**. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." **Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.***

Temptation to Sin: Before Jesus began His ministry, He was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil for 40 days. (See Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13.) The word for *tempt* can also be translated test and, during this time, the devil tested Jesus with every possible provocation to sin and ungodliness. But Jesus never sinned because He was empowered by the nature of God within Him and He declared the Scriptures as a weapon of truth against the lies of the enemy.

Now, we have the Holy Spirit dwelling inside of us the same way Jesus did. Therefore, we have the same dynamis power in us to resist temptation and strengthen in character, virtue, and purity.

*1 John 3:9: **No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God.** (Also 1 John 5:18.)*

Religious Error: Throughout His ministry, Jesus was hated by the religious leaders who constantly attempted to trap Him into error or deception. Even with their extensive knowledge of the Scriptures, they did not recognize Jesus as God and so they challenged Him and tested Him. Jesus simply but strongly rebuked the religious leaders for their error. They were rendered incapable of answering His questions.

*John 3:10: **You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?***

*John 5:39-40: **You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.***

*Matthew 22:46: **No one [of the Pharisees] could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.***

Jesus also rebuked the religious leaders because they considered their man-made rules and traditions to be equal with or sometimes even superior to God's Law.

*Mark 7:6-9: He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: " 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. **They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions."*** And he continued, "You have a fine way of **setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!**"

Now, Jesus sends us out to be like Him and not be entangled by the traditions and religious observances that have entered into the Church if they are outside of the commands of Jesus and the Word of God. He promises us that when we stand before religious people, the Holy Spirit will give us wisdom that they will not be able to contest.

*Mark 13:9-11: You must be on your guard. **You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues.** On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, **do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.***

Other's Demands, Unbelief, and Offense: The religious leaders often demanded a sign from Jesus to prove His authority from God. He refused to indulge their demands. He knew that, even though He had performed many miraculous signs, no sign would be enough to convince them.

*Matthew 12:39: He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! **But none will be given** it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. (See also Mark 8:12; Luke 11:29.)*

*Luke 16:31: He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, **they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.**'*

*Luke 20:8: Jesus said, "**Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.**"*

Jesus also faced skeptics in His hometown and could not do many miracles there because of their unbelief. (See Matthew 13:53-58; Mark 6:1-6; Luke 4:14-30.) Plus, during His ministry years, Jesus was surrounded by ordinary people who wanted to believe Him, but somehow they could not quite get fully onboard in their faith that He is the Messiah. Jesus' most common expression to followers like these was, "O, you of little faith," which gently chided them for their unbelief and addition to other comments He

made about their hard hearts or the fact that they were slow to believe. On a few occasions, with a sigh of exasperation, Jesus asked, "Do you still not believe?"

There were also those who proclaimed their undying loyalty and devotion to Jesus. In response, Jesus brought into view the ultimate price. (Consider Luke 9:57-58; 18:18-30; John 6:32-70.) When He taught things like this, which were difficult for His followers to comprehend, many people said that He had lost His mind, accused Him of being evil, or deserted Him. Jesus let the Scriptures and the works of God defend Him. He did not defend Himself or demand their loyalty or submission. Instead, He let them go their own way and blessed those who were not offended by Him.

*John 6:60-61, 66-67: On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, **"Does this offend you? ... From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. "You do not want to leave too, do you?"** Jesus asked the Twelve.*

*John 10:37-38: **Do not believe me unless I do the works of my Father.** But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, **believe the works**, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father." (See also John 5:36, 10:25, 14:11.)*

*Luke 7:22-23: So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John **what you have seen and heard**: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. **Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.**" (See also Matthew 11:6.)*

When Peter rebuked Jesus for talking about how He must suffer, be rejected and die, Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan," rebuking the evil one who was speaking through Peter's mouth. Then, Jesus proceeded to walk towards His destiny as Savior of the world.

Now, Jesus sends us out to be like Him. We have nothing to prove to anyone and have no need to defend ourselves or to defend God for the way He is guiding our lives. And when those around us don't believe in full faith with us as we walk with Jesus, we can continue walking firmly and faithfully in obedience to the Lord while gently chiding them for their small view of God's greatness, or rebuking them for speaking for the enemy.

Counting the Cost: Jesus counted the cost before leaving the comforts of Heaven to fulfill His task from God. Then when the time approached for Jesus' greatest trial, He petitioned God in intense prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, asking if there was any other way for God's wrath to be satisfied. In Gethsemane, Jesus again counted the cost of laying down His life. Then, He submitted Himself willingly and offered all of Himself out of total devotion and love for God.

*Matthew 26:38-39, 46: Then he said to them, **"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.** Stay here and keep watch with me." Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, **"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."** ... **Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!**"*

Now, Jesus sends us out to offer our lives to God no matter what it costs us to follow Him. He made it clear in no uncertain terms that following Him costs everything and that His followers should *count the cost* before declaring our allegiance. To follow Jesus with all our heart and all we have, we must put to death our carnal nature and willful desires for what we want and how we want God to do things in order to submit ourselves to the will of God and see it fulfilled.

*Luke 14:26-27, 33: If anyone comes to me and does not **hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters--yes, even their own life--such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not **carry their cross and follow me** cannot be my disciple. ...***

*In the same way, those of you who do not **give up everything you have** cannot be my disciples. (Consider also Philippians 3:7-11.)*

Betrayed, Falsely Accused, Unjustly Condemned: In His greatest trial, Jesus was betrayed by a close friend, turned over to the religious authorities, offered up to the governing world powers, given a mock trial which scarcely complied with any form of order or legal standards, and was sentenced to death at the hands of the very people that He came to save. The time had come for Jesus to fulfill the Scriptures written about His suffering and death so He did not rebuke or resist, nor would He allow any of His followers to do so.

*John 18:11, 36: Jesus commanded Peter, "**Put your sword away!** Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" ... Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. **If it were, my servants would fight** to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place." (Also Matthew 26:52.)*

Jesus was led like a lamb to the slaughter and did not open His mouth because He trusted God without reservation. (See Isaiah 53:7.) When Jesus stood before the religious leaders, before Pilate, before Herod, and before the people of Israel and the masses of the world, He never defended Himself.

*Matthew 27:12: When he was accused by the **chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer.***

*Mark 15:5: But **Jesus still made no reply**, and **Pilate** was amazed.*

*Luke 23:8-9: When **Herod** saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort. He plied him with many questions, but **Jesus gave him no answer.***

Jesus warned us to understand that these types of things will happen to us as well, even from those we love the most. He told us in advance so that we, like Him, can stand firm in our faith.

*Luke 21:16-19: **You will be betrayed** even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, **and they will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of me.** But not a hair of your head will perish. **Stand firm, and you will win life.***

*John 16:1-2: All this **I have told you so that you will not fall away.** They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God.*

Apparent Loss/Defeat and Shame: From an onlooker's perspective, it seemed that Jesus was a total failure. He willingly allowed darkness to have its glory for a moment as He endured the most brutal beating, scourging, and crucifixion the world has ever known. He took upon Himself all of the wrath, punishment, curse, sickness, and evil oppression of the world trusting that God would fulfill His purpose.

*Luke 22:52-53: Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the elders, who had come for him, "**Am I leading a rebellion**, that you have come with swords and clubs? Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. **But this is your hour--when darkness reigns.**"*

*Philippians 2:6-8: Who, **being in very nature God**, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, **he made himself nothing** by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, **he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death-- even death on a cross!***

Even though Jesus counted the cost of giving His life, He *scorned the shame*. This means that Jesus knew the cost and thought it was a small price to pay in order to complete the work of God.

*Hebrews 12:2b: **For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.***

Now, Jesus sends us out to face trials with faith and willingness because we consider our sufferings a light thing compared to the great value and worth of knowing Him. We can turn the other cheek, allow ourselves to appear to be failures in the eyes of this world, and die to ourselves because we trust that God is at work on our behalf and for our good. (See Romans 8:28.)

*Philippians 3:10: I want to know Christ--yes, to know the power of his resurrection and **participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death***

Not Holding a Grudge: During all of this humiliation, physical pain, and spiritual anguish, Jesus maintained His heart of mercy and compassion – even for those who were crucifying Him. He forgave His enemies without animosity or contention. He wanted all of them to be saved and to have a chance to know God.

*Luke 23:34a: Jesus said, "**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**"*

Now, Jesus sends us out and gives us strength from within by the Holy Spirit to walk in love and mercy for others, including those who treat us shamefully and persecute us.

*Matthew 5:44-45: But I tell you, **love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.***

LEARNING OBEDIENCE

Jesus, the Son of Man, took on flesh and blood like ours and showed us how to endure through trials with perfect faith and right conduct. Through His suffering, Jesus learned the challenges we face as we try to obey God in the trials of this life. Therefore, He is able to be compassionate and understanding when we face trials and temptations in our lives. Praise God!

*Hebrews 5:7-8: During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. **So though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered***

*Hebrews 4:15: For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, **but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet he did not sin.***

Most importantly, Jesus did not doubt God's love for Him. He did not doubt His Father's ability to do all that He had promised and planned. Jesus knew God was worthy of His submission, His hope, His faith, His love, His sacrifice, and His life.

Therefore, as we follow Jesus, not by outward imitation but by the inward leading of the Holy Spirit, we can anticipate that the Holy Spirit will guide us to respond rightly no matter what trial we may face. Assuredly, trials of righteousness will come to test our resolve, our devotion, our willingness, and our faith.

And so again I say, through every trial and through all the pain, when we hear the heart of God asking, *Do you believe that I am good?, Do you believe that I love you?, Do you believe that I am enough?, Do you believe what I have promised you?, and Do you believe that I have finished it?,* let us keep our eyes on Jesus and our minds on heaven and resoundingly answer back to Him, Yes!

SON OF DAVID – SON OF MAN

Matthew 21:7-9 NIV – They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

DESCRIPTION

King David was a man of war who conquered Israel's enemies triumphantly. God promised David that one of his sons/descendants would be the eternal King who would conquer all enemies of God's people.

In the days of Jesus, the Jews had great anticipation of this Son of David. They wanted a King who would come as a man of war – like David had been. Indeed, Jesus will come to conquer all His enemies at the end of the age. However, Jesus came the first time as a Suffering Servant and most often referred to Himself as the Son of Man. He shared the weakness of flesh and blood and suffered shamefully in order to conquer the greatest enemy of the human soul – sin.

In our lives today, we often look to Jesus to come and conquer our earthly problems like a triumphant man of war. At times, He does this. However other times, Jesus leads us to follow Him in suffering and taking up our cross rather than what seems to be earthly victory. This can be painful, disappointing, bewildering, humiliating, or unexpected for us as it may seem contrary to our view of God's promises for our lives. This said, as we share in Christ's sufferings and obedience to His teachings, we are on the path to experiencing God's resurrection power.

Practicing this Son of David exercise is about knowing when God is inviting us into Christ's likeness as a Suffering Servant rather than a conquering King so that we grow in our understanding of God's ways, His will, and His power to resurrect.

Category: Self-Denial

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PURPOSE:

To recognize God's approach and wisdom in our situations.

To detach from our own expectations of how God should handle our problems.

To increase our willingness to share in the sufferings of Jesus.

SPIRITUAL FRUIT:

Sharing in sufferings of Christ.

Increased humility.

Developing discernment of God's dealings and purposes.

Increased freedom to obey God in our circumstances.

Greater surrender to God.

Reduced striving for outcomes.

PRAYER

Father, thank you for sending Jesus to be the perfect example of serving you as the Suffering Servant and the conquering King. Increase my understanding of how you want me like Him in the situations in my life and help me to walk in your ways. In Jesus' name, Amen.

CONSIDERATIONS

In what ways has Jesus revealed His great power to you?

In what ways has Jesus asked you to take up your cross?

In what ways has following Jesus been different or more difficult than you were originally expecting? How has this confused or disappointed you?

Do you think suffering is a sign of God's punishment? How so?

How did Jesus demonstrate humility by choosing the path of suffering rather than exercising His authority as King of all the earth? Do you think it was hard for Him? How?

PRACTICE

- Write out a list of some of the situations or trials you are facing in your life right now.
 - Include every kind of trial you can think of like finances, relationships, spiritual blocks, health, persecution, etc.
- One by one, ask God to speak to you about His perspective on each situation. Use the following questions as a guide:
 - God, do you want me to let you fight this one for me or is there something you are asking me to do about it?
 - God, are you asking me to turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, submit myself, keep my mouth shut, etc? How?
 - God, am I tolerating suffering like sickness, demonic oppression, evil influences, etc. that is not your will for me? What do you want me to do about this?
 - God, how do you want me to change my approach to this so that its recurring pattern/cycle in my life is broken?
- Thank God for His wisdom for your situations. Put what He has revealed to you into practice in your life right away.

NOTES:

ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES:

Isaiah 53

Matthew 5:10

James 1:2-3, 12

1 Peter 3:8-17, 4:1

Acts 14:22

Luke 9:23

Philippians 2:5-11

John 6:15

2 Corinthians 5:16

Matthew 22:43-45



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TRIALS, TESTING, & TRIBULATION*

In the Garden of Eden, the serpent was described as more crafty or subtle than any other of God's creatures. Even today, this subtlety makes the evil one an expert deceiver, distracter, and destroyer if we are not spiritually aware enough to discern his schemes.

*Genesis 3:1: Now **the serpent was more crafty** than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "**Did God really say**, 'You must not eat ...'?"*

*2Corinthians 2:11: In order that **Satan might not outwit us**. For we are **not unaware of his schemes**.*

Regardless of how the enemy is attacking us or attempting to divert or deceive us, Jesus conquered it at the cross. Everything we need for victory, godliness, and the fulfillment of God's plans for us was provided through the work of Jesus. We receive it as a free gift, by grace through faith in what Jesus accomplish for us. Our job is to discern the schemes of the enemy in order to respond correctly to trials as they come.

*2Peter 1:3-4: His divine power **has given us everything we need for a godly life** through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may **participate in the divine nature**, having **escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires**.*

We previously covered Jesus' parable of the four soils about how our hearts receive and respond to the word of God. Trials serve to amplify our response and thus, reveal the true condition of our hearts. This said, truth be told, there are only two ways to respond to the trials we face: with our flesh which is our inherited sinful Adamic nature or, by the power of the Holy Spirit, with Christlikeness which is our new nature in Him. Selfishness, self-defense, and focus on temporal values is our flesh. Trusting God, continuing to love, and prioritizing the eternal is Christlikeness by the Holy Spirit.

For a Christian, the token mark of being spiritually mature is to be like Jesus even to the extent of loving our enemies, praying for our accusers, and forgiving those who are murdering us. While our trials may be small by comparison, whatever we face, it is our right responses which prove us to be God's children. (Consider Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 23:34.) Now, Jesus calls us to be like Him and love one another as He loves us. True love is costly even when our lives are not on the line. Love costs us time and dignity; our own desires and way of doing things; our right to be right and our right to be mad and seek revenge. Love is not a feeling, it's a state of being which flows into action. (See 1 Corinthians 13:4-8; Romans 12:9-21.)

Knowing this as followers of Jesus, we set out to be like Him and bring the love of God to the whole world. Then, it happens. Someone whom we are loving with all this love that we have received from Jesus turns around and mocks us, rejects us, accuses us of being evil, or may work against us or our work for God. How do we respond? Do we respond like ourselves in self-defense, with a counter-mock, with retorted insults, or with equalizing rejection? Or do we respond like Christ, with mercy and love, compassion, kindness, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice?

TRIALS & CHASTISEMENT

Trials we face are not punishment from God because Jesus took all of our punishment upon Himself. (See Isaiah 53:3; James 1:13.) God is not the trial. He is training us through the trial. This is His chastisement and

it can be unpleasant because when we want to justify or avenge ourselves, God instead tells us to deny ourselves, turn the other cheek, and trust Him, often in the midst of much waiting, patience, and endurance. Through this specialized boot camp for character and faith, God brings us to spiritual maturity, making us like Jesus in responding to situations with right conduct and right beliefs.

*Hebrews 12:7-8, 11: **Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children.** For what children are not disciplined by their father?... No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it **produces a harvest of righteousness and peace** for those who have been trained by it.*

Every trial and test of character and faith is an opportunity to be trained by God. Nevertheless, every trial feels like a spiritual, emotional, and often humiliating punch in the face. We should not be shocked but rather rejoice when trials come because God's righteous training through real life scenarios teaches us to love others and to carry out His purposes in spite of whatever is launched against us.

*1 Peter 4:12-13: Dear friends, **do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you**, as though something strange were happening to you. **But rejoice** inasmuch **as you participate in the sufferings of Christ**, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*

Think of it like a loving heavenly Father training His children about how to defend themselves from a big schoolyard bully. The devil, the world and its ways, and our own fleshly desires intimidate and terrorize us while we live in this playground called the world. But our loving heavenly Father whispers to us through the Holy Spirit about how to handle all of these bullies the way that His beloved Son Jesus did.

The definition of *sin* is missing the mark and is an archery term used to describe an archer who did not hit the target perfectly. Major and minor offenses are still missing the mark. We all have yearnings from within for things other than what we have. These cravings of our flesh can range from totally ungodly, to things which may seem minor to us but are still out of alignment with God's will. Our flesh lures us by temptation and excuses or justifications for enabling us to indulge our lusts.

*James 1:14-16: but **each person is tempted** when they are dragged away **by their own evil desire** and enticed. Then, after **desire has conceived**, it **gives birth to sin**; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. **Don't be deceived**, my dear brothers and sisters.*

When trials hit our life, they evoke a reaction within us. Will we miss the mark by giving into the desires of our flesh or obey the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit whispers to us in purity, truth, and holiness. God's grace is so sufficient that all things are permitted, meaning that we are totally and absolutely free in Christ. This means that the enticement and allure of sin being forbidden has been nullified. This said, not all things are beneficial, good for us, or worth doing because they do not reflect the nature of Christ within us and are unloving towards others. (See 1 Corinthians 6:12, 10:23.) The same divine nature which strengthened Jesus in the wilderness against all of Satan's temptations and testings is now within us to strengthen us so that we can respond the way that He did and pass the test.

*James 4:7: Submit yourselves, then, to God. **Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.***

TYPES OF TESTING

There are two primary types of testing which we will encounter as Christ followers. The first is a *negative test* in which the thing being tested is expected to fail and may even be tested in increasing levels of severity until it fails. The second is a *positive test* for genuineness in which the thing being tested is expected to be proven true. In the New Testament Greek, the words for this are *peirazo* and *dokimazo*, respectively.

God does not test us negatively. (See James 1:13.) Things which test us negatively [peirazo] include temptations, hardships, sicknesses, seemingly unfulfilled promises of God, deception, distraction, and accusation. While we are being negatively tested, it will seem that lies against God multiply in our mind

and as this continues, we grow weary with discouragement, principally through thoughts of guilt, shame, and hopelessness, especially if we seem to be waiting a long time for God's promises to come to pass. Through all of this, our faith and character are tested.

For example, when Jesus was in the wilderness being tested by Satan, He was negatively tested [peirazo] by the evil one in every possible way. Another example of negative testing is when Jesus warned Peter that Satan had asked to *sift him like wheat*.

*Luke 22:31: Simon, Simon [Peter,] **Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat.***

This expression is defined as "an inward agitation to try one's faith to the verge of overthrow." The enemy's aim in negatively testing us is to lure us into failure in our character and our beliefs through all means available in increasing levels of pressure until failure is accomplished. Often it seems like this happens in increasing measures of difficulty and oppression or in many different areas of our lives at one time, pushing us beyond what we can endure on our own. Indeed, the enemy is trying to push us to the point of failure.

This said, when these negative tests and temptations happen in our lives we can respond rightly by following the direction of the Holy Spirit. In the same way that Jesus and Holy Spirit filled Peter responded to trials, when we live by the Holy Spirit's direction, our faith and character will be proven genuine.

*1 Corinthians 10:12-13: So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No **temptation [peirasmos]** has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be **tempted [peirazo] beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted [peirasmos], he will also provide a way out so that you can endure.***

On the other hand, there is positive testing [dokimazo] which proves that our faith is genuine. This is the type of testing done by a jeweler who examines a diamond to ensure that it is not a fake. For example, when someone is nominated to be a deacon, the church must prove their character by testing [dokimazo] them. (See 1 Timothy 3:10.) More significantly, before we partake of communion, ingesting the very blood and body of Jesus, we are encouraged to positively test [dokimazo] or examine ourselves to see if we are truly believing all that He has accomplished for us. (See 1 Corinthians 11:28-30.) In fact, some believers were experiencing weakness, sickness, and even death because they were failing the positive test of faith by not believing all that Christ accomplished for us through His body and blood.

This means that, perhaps, some of the trials that we experience are because we are not fully perceiving and believing what Jesus accomplished for us through His life, death, and resurrection. Therefore, we should positively test ourselves. Is our faith the genuine article?

Unlike Jesus, when we are negatively tested [peirazo], sometimes we fail. There are times when we give into temptation or we stumble into sin or error. It is exactly at these times when we may repent and return to Jesus by trusting that His sacrifice is sufficient to cover all our stumbling. Even if we have been negatively tested to the point of personal catastrophe, God's grace is still unquestionably extended to us.

Then, we have the opportunity to positively test [dokimazo] ourselves and ask ourselves again if we really believe that Jesus finished it and that we are accepted by God because of Jesus in spite of our stumbling. We receive God's grace afresh and can carry on in our walk with Him.

In fact, this is the whole purpose of every trial. Whether positive testing or negative testing and whether a test of character or steadfastness, the genuineness of our faith is proven. Enduring through trials draw us to spiritual maturity so that in every area of our lives we are mature and complete in Christ and walking in God's will for us.

*1 Peter 1:6-7: In all 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 the proven genuineness of your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.***

*James 1:2-4: Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, **whenever you face trials of many kinds**, because you know that the **testing of your faith** produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work **so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.***

TESTING GOD

As a side note, as we encounter various kinds of trials and tests, we can negatively or positively test God. When Jesus was being negatively tested by the evil one in the wilderness, He quoted from the Book of Deuteronomy, "You must not put the Lord your God to the test," from an incident in Israel's history. (See Luke 4:12; Deuteronomy 6:16.) In the historical account, shortly after the Israelites had walked through the waters of the Red Sea, they came to a place where there was no water and they started complaining. The conflict escalated until they professed that God must not be with them anymore or must have brought them out of Egypt in order to kill them in the wilderness. After the Lord showed Moses how to cause drinking water to miraculously gush out of a rock, Moses named the place Massah which means *testing* because they had tested God by saying, "Is God with us or not?" (See Exodus 17:1-7.) Even when they had seen God work great miracles on their behalf, they tested Him by their unbelief.

*Psalm 78:18-19, 21-22, 32, 41, 56: They **willfully put God to the test** by demanding the food they craved. They **spoke against God**; they said, "**Can God really spread a table in the wilderness? ... When the LORD heard them, he was furious; his fire broke out against Jacob, and his wrath rose against Israel, for they did not believe in God or trust in his deliverance. ... In spite of all this, they kept on sinning; in spite of his wonders, they did not believe. ... Again and again they put God to the test; they vexed the Holy One of Israel. ... But they put God to the test and rebelled against the Most High; they did not keep his statutes.***

From this, we see that we put God to the test in a negative way when we do not believe Him or trust Him for our salvation, deliverance, healing, and sustenance. We negatively test God through our unbelief in His ability to fulfill His promises, when we doubt His goodness, or think that He has evil intentions for us even if this is what our circumstances seem to indicate.

However, the Apostle Paul encourages us to be so renewed in our minds away from the intellect, wisdom, and pattern of this world that we positively put God to the test.

*Romans 12:1-2 - Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to **offer your bodies as a living sacrifice**, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. **Then you will be able to test [dokimazo] and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will.***

This said, our minds are renewed not through head knowledge of God but through putting our faith into action by positively testing God and His will. Jesus gave His disciples only one prayer to pray and this prayer includes the phrase, "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (See Matthew 6:10.) Now, like a jeweler inspecting a diamond to confirm that it is real, we are encouraged to test the genuineness of God's perfect and pleasing will—on earth as it is in heaven. Therefore, each of us should constantly be putting God to the test in a positive way by genuinely trusting Jesus, particularly as we face trials and tests of life.

TRIBULATION

Jesus warned us that trials will come. In no uncertain terms, He prepared His followers for trials, particularly in the times to come before His return. He did this so that our faith does not fail and so we can endure to the end, no matter the cost.

*John 16:33 ESV: I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. **In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.**"*

Luke 21:12-19: *But before all this, **they will seize you and persecute you.** They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and **you will be brought before kings and governors,** and all on account of my name. And so you will bear testimony to me. But **make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves.** For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and **they will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm, and you will win life.** (See Luke 21 and Matthew 24.)*

The word used for *tribulation* means "pressing or pressure, trouble, oppression, distress, the afflictions of those hard pressed by siege and the calamities of war and the straights of want." We follow a crucified King. When we live our lives for the Kingdom of God by following Jesus and doing the things that He did, we wage war against the kingdom of the evil one. It is a clash of kingdoms that the world takes note of and that is opposed by all the forces of darkness. The epic battle to come between the powers of this world and the powers of darkness raging against the Kingdom of God will put every believer to the ultimate trial and test.

Daniel 7:25: He [the man of lawlessness] will **speak against the Most High and oppress his holy people and try to change the set times and the laws. The holy people will be delivered into his hands for a time, times and half a time.**

Revelation 13:7-10: It [the beast] was **given power to wage war against God's holy people and to conquer them.** And it was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast--all whose names have not been written in the Lamb's book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world. Whoever has ears, let them hear. "**If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity they will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword they will be killed.**" This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God's people. (Similar to Jeremiah 15:2.)

No kind of trial, test, trouble, or hardship can separate us from God's love and eternal purpose for us if we will remain firm in our faith. Even if we are imprisoned, beaten, or martyred, we have not been abandoned over to death like sheep led to the slaughter. NO! We are more than conquerors through the victory Christ has won for us!

Romans 8:35-39: **Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?** As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." (Quoting Psalm 44:11, 22.) **No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.** For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, **nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

Jesus is with us in every trial to give us wisdom, strength, and courage to respond rightly, the way that He would respond if He were in our exact set of circumstances. God assured Jesus of eternal victory and Jesus believed Him. Now, because Jesus has already overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil, we are assured of our victory when our faith is in Him. Will our faith prove genuine?

Luke 18:7-8: *And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, **when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?***

ENEMY TACTICS

2 Corinthians 2:11 NIV – in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

DESCRIPTION

In the Garden of Eden, the serpent was described as more subtle than any other of God's creatures. Even today, this subtlety makes the evil one an expert deceiver, distracter, and destroyer if we are not aware enough to discern his schemes. Sometimes, it is an event in our lives that triggers an enemy infiltration of our thoughts. Other times, it is a persistent and gradual wearing down and decline of our faith or endurance.

Regardless of how the enemy is attacking us or attempting to divert or deceive us, Jesus conquered it at the cross. Everything we need for victory, godliness, and the fulfillment of God's plans for us was provided through the work of Jesus. We receive it as a free gift, by grace through faith in what Jesus accomplish for us. In fact, when we do identify the real root of what the enemy is attacking in our lives, we realize that what the enemy is working against us is exactly what God is working in our favor. For example, if the enemy attack is *discouragement*, God is *working courage* in us.

To put Enemy Tactics into practice is about allowing the Lord to reveal the subtle ways that the evil one is laying temptations before us or has worked his way into our thoughts so that we can renew our faith, hope, trust, and freedom in Jesus and the work He finished for us through His death and resurrection.

PRAYER

Father, thank you that you sent your Son, Jesus, to destroy the works of the enemy including everything that attempts to separate me from you or discourage and distract me from your plans and purposes. Help me now to discern the tactics of the enemy in my life so that he has no place in me. In Jesus' name, Amen.



PURPOSE:

To discern the tactics of the enemy.

To remain faithful to Christ and God's purpose for us.

To live established in the truth and hope of the Gospel.

SPIRITUAL FRUIT:

Increased discernment of the attacks of the enemy.

Renewed identity in Christ and the finished work of the cross.

Restored faith and hope.

Repentance from focus on self.

Purging of evil, pride, and discouragement.

CONSIDERATIONS

Consider these enemy tactics, listed in no particular order:

- **Doubt/Unbelief:** particularly in God's goodness or grace
- **Discouragement:** looking to the size of the problem rather than the ability of God
- **Diversion:** turning from God's instructions or greater purpose
- **Failure:** looking at apparent failure, not trusting God for redemption and victory
- **Frustration:** losing patience, not trusting God's timing
- **Flesh:** temptation to do things in our own strength
- **Performance:** thinking God's plan can be thwarted by us
- **Condemnation:** guilty feelings over sins from past or present
- **Success:** accepting exaltation of man out of God's order
- **Shortcuts:** trying to skip stages of God's plan development
- **Weariness:** losing strength due to extended battles/service

PRACTICE

1. Ask the Holy Spirit to highlight one of the enemy tactics above that is relevant to your life right now.
2. Ask the Lord to show you how the enemy has subtly infiltrated your thoughts using this tactic. Talk to Him about:
 - When did the enemy start attacking you in this way? Was there an event which triggered this or was it gradual?
 - Ask the Lord to reveal to you the real root of the issue in your present situation. (i.e. pride, fear, a past wound, etc.)
3. Ask the Lord to show you how He conquered this enemy tactic through His death and resurrection.
 - What else do Scripture and the Holy Spirit say about this?
4. Ask the Lord how He wants you to humble yourself before Him and resist the devil so that he flees from you.
 - How is He guiding you into faith and rest in Him?
 - Is there something He is asking you to do in your situation?
5. Do whatever He says.

NOTES:



ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES:

- Enemy Schemes
- Genesis 3:1
- Daniel 7:25
- Genesis 16
- 2Chronicles 26:16
- 1 Samuel 15
- Focus/Faith
- Luke 4:1-13
- Colossians 2:13-14
- Hebrews 12:1-2
- 1 John 1:7
- Romans 8:1
- Colossians 1:9-14
- John 6:15
- Galatians 6:9
- 2 Corinthians 4:16
- James 4:7

SUFFERING, THORNS, & MYSTERIES*

Jesus paid on the cross for our salvation, deliverance, healing, and sustenance and it is God's desire for us to experience the fullness of the blessing and benefits of what Jesus died to give us. This said, God has an enemy who launches attacks against our lives. This enemy is the father of lies and is constantly trying to convince us that God is not good, that Jesus is not Lord, and that we have done something to deserve less than the full experience of God's benefits and blessings as His children or that we have to do something to earn it.

While there are times when Jesus calls upon us to take up our cross, turn the other cheek, and follow Him in learning obedience through the things we suffer, there are other times when it is the enemy who is attempting to deceive us into accepting types of suffering which God has not ordained for us and which Jesus paid in full on the cross for us to be free from.

For starters, we are not perfected or sanctified through sickness or suffering. We are sanctified by the blood of Jesus, His Word, His name, and by the Holy Spirit. (See Hebrews 10:10,14; John 15:3, 17:17; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Titus 3:5.) Moreover, sharing in the sufferings of Christ does not include sickness. Jesus was never sick. The words used to describe sharing the *sufferings* of Christ are defined as *an external suffering, hardship, or pain of the same kind, or to suffer evils, particularly persecutions, in like manner*. Jesus suffered by giving up the splendors and privileges of heaven in order to be born into a flesh like ours and live completely dependent on God's provision. He suffered when He willingly offered Himself to uncompromisingly obey the will of God, even though it included rejection by His own people and by the world, having insults hurled at Him without retaliating, being led like a lamb to slaughter without defending Himself, and being whipped, scourged, beaten, mocked, betrayed, and ultimately crucified to death while praying for his crucifiers to be forgiven. (See Isaiah 53:3, 7; John 1:11; 1 Peter 2:23-24.) Through all of this, Jesus relentlessly trusted in God's goodness and power to bring His promises to pass and unwaveringly prioritized eternal matters over the things of this world. Even as a beloved Son, Jesus learned obedience through the things He suffered – not through accepting sickness or oppression. (See Hebrews 5:8.)

I am not saying that sickness is not suffering—it is. Since the fall of Adam, there have been many and various forms of suffering in this world, including sickness. However, when we read Scriptures about glorying or being patient in tribulation, rejoicing in suffering, or receiving the Lord's comfort in our trials, we should know that sickness and disease are not what is being addressed. (See Romans 5:3, 12:12; Colossians 1:24; 2 Corinthians 1:4.) Jesus did not comfort the sick in their sickness, ask them to be patient, or perpetuate their sickness in any way—He healed the sick. Therefore, healing and health are what Jesus demonstrated to be God's will for us and what He has made available to us when we place our faith in Him. While it is true that we are exhorted to rejoice always in all things, we should not embrace or glory in our sickness as the Lord's will for us when Jesus died on a cross to pay for our healing.

Here are some other common lies of the enemy on this subject.

A THORN IN THE FLESH

The enemy often succeeds in convincing believers that we will not be healed because our illness is a *thorn in the flesh*, like the Apostle Paul had. This is what the Apostle Paul said about his thorn in the flesh:

2 Corinthians 12:7b-9a: *Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, **I was given 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."*

The Apostle Paul was a Jewish man and, before becoming a follower of Jesus, he was schooled in the Scriptures with the finest education in the world in his day and was known to have excelled in his studies because of his extreme zealousness for God and His Word. (See Galatians 1:14.) In light of this, in several of Paul's letters, he used figures of speech from the Scriptures that were commonly known among his people. For example, in Paul's letter to Timothy, he said that the Lord had saved *him from the lion's mouth*. (See 2 Timothy 4:17.) In this, Paul was not referring to a literal lion. In Jewish history, there was a man who was literally delivered from the lion's mouth by God—Daniel. (See Daniel 6; Hebrews 11:33.) Hence, Paul was using an expression common to the Jewish people as a means of saying that even though no human had come to his defense, the Lord had spared him from enemies seeking to destroy him.

It was in this same manner that Paul used the expression *thorn in the flesh*. Paul did not mean that he had a literal thorn in his flesh but was using a figure of speech from the Scriptures. In the history of Israel, the Lord instructed the Israelites to destroy and drive out all the inhabitants who were occupying the Promised Land. He warned them that the inhabitants from the other nations would become like *thorns in the flesh* if the Israelites failed to drive them out completely because the wrong beliefs and practices of the nations would steer the Israelites away from worshiping Him as the only true God.

Numbers 33:52, 55: **Drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you.** Destroy all their carved images and their cast idols, and demolish all their high places. ... But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, **those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides.** They will give you trouble in the land where you will live.

Joshua 23:13: Then you may be sure that the LORD your God will no longer **drive out these nations before you.** Instead, **they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes,** until you perish from this good land, which the LORD your God has given you.

Judges 2:3 ESV: So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but **they shall become thorns in your sides,** and their gods shall be a snare to you.

Ezekiel 28:24: No longer will the people of Israel have **malicious neighbors who are painful briars and sharp thorns.** Then they will know that I am the Sovereign LORD.

When Paul wrote about his *thorn in the flesh*, it was in a letter to the believers in Corinth in response to the fact that false apostles were attacking Paul and mocking his apostolic authority. The entire chapter leading up to his use of the expression *thorn in the flesh* pertains to persecution from these false apostles.

2Corinthians 11:23-28 - *Are 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. Five times I received from the Jews the **forty lashes minus one.** Three times I was **beaten with rods,** once I was **pelted with stones,** three times I was **shipwrecked,** I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been **in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers.** I 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.** Besides everything else, I face daily **the pressure of my concern for all the churches.***

Paul was literally, brutally, repeatedly, and physically assaulted by people in this world who refused to

believe Jesus and by worldly believers who rejected his God-given authority. His boasting in these persecutions immediately precedes and follows his use of the expression *thorn in the flesh*. Accordingly, it seems fairly clear to me that persecution is what Paul was referring to as his *thorn in the flesh*. For someone to claim that Paul's thorn is some kind of illness or disease seems like a drastic leap out of the context of his letter to the Corinthians and the whole of Scripture. Also, since many claim that Paul's *thorn in the flesh* was a problem with his eyes or point to the bodily illness that first brought Paul to the Galatians, it is worth noting that Paul arrived in Galatia after being stoned by the crowd at Lystra so inhumanely that they thought he was dead. (See Galatians 4:13; Acts 14:19.) It would not be surprising if his body and his eyes were in a weakened or infirm state after such treatment.

But let's not stop there. We may still be left with the question of why God would allow *thorns in the flesh* in the first place, especially for His chosen people and the most influential apostle the world has ever known. Fortunately, God is so good that He states His purposes clearly. The nations that the Israelites were unable to drive out were left there by God in order to test the Israelites in their faithfulness to Him as the one true God and to teach them His methods for fighting battles.

*Judges 3:1-4: These are the nations **the LORD left to test all those Israelites** who had not experienced any of the wars in Canaan (**he did this only to teach warfare** to the descendants of the Israelites who had not had previous battle experience): the five rulers of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites living in the Lebanon mountains from Mount Baal Hermon to Lebo Hamath. **They were left to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the LORD's commands**, which he had given their ancestors through Moses.*

God uses trials and persecution from unbelievers and false prophets to train us in the way of righteousness. (See Deuteronomy 13:1-11; Matthew 13:28-30; 2 Thessalonians 2:11; Hebrews 5:8.) We must never forget that we follow a crucified King who calls upon us to take up our own cross and follow after Him in these types of sufferings. (See Luke 9:23.) God is not going to take away the cross that Jesus told us to carry. When we look at Paul's thorn in this way, it makes perfect sense that God refused to take the thorn away and that Paul learned to delight in it. Suffering for the name of Jesus and for the Kingdom of God due to persecution is cause for great rejoicing. (See Matthew 5:10-13.) Paul's thorn was not sickness. This leaves us with no excuse for settling for receiving less than the healing Jesus died to give us.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY OR GOD ALLOWED IT

Another tactic of the enemy against believers is to convince them that God's sovereign control over all things means that their sickness is from God. This is a lie.

We live in a fallen world and disease is a part of it. Since the fall of Adam, we earn or deserve sickness through disobedience. When God redeemed Israel and gave His Law, He revealed that the way to stay in health and live a long life is through obedience to Him. When we violate God's Law, we deserve a penalty which can include sickness—the wages of sin is death. (See Romans 6:23.) If we had not sinned, we would not have warranted punishment. Righteousness is our protection and the only way we can remain on the path of life and health.

So far, the "God allowed it" argument seems to be right and you could even add, "we deserve it." However, the way to pay the penalty for disobedience is through a blood sacrifice of high enough value to reconcile us to God and restore us to righteousness and its benefits, including health. Of course, this is exactly what Jesus came to do for us. His blood perpetually pays the penalty for everything we have ever done or could ever do to earn or deserve God's punishment. (See 1 John 1:7.) As long as our faith is in Jesus' perfect righteousness on our behalf, we can receive our healing as a free gift. Moreover, Jesus gave us authority over every disease, unclean spirit, and over the enemy so that we can forbid sickness in our lives. (See Luke 9:1, 10:19; Matthew 18:18.)

Therefore, not only does God **not** allow sickness—He has paid the price for us to not be sick. Sickness

violates the covenant we have with God through faith in Jesus who redeemed us from the effects of the fall of man and transferred us to the Kingdom of Heaven where sickness is forbidden. It is our own wrong understanding of what Jesus has done for us, our unbelief in the benefits that God extends freely to us in the New Covenant, our unwarranted fear of an enemy who has been thoroughly defeated, or our determination to do things our own way rather than being led by the Holy Spirit that gives sickness a place in our lives. God does not allow sickness—we allow it through unbelief.

GOD IS TEACHING

Another common erroneous belief is to say of sickness that, “God is teaching me through this.” This is a lie. Not only does God **not** chastise us through sickness—He laid all sickness upon Jesus so that we can be healed. Jesus took all of our chastisement and all of our sickness upon Himself so that, through faith in Him, we have been healed by His wounds. (See Isaiah 53:4-5.)

Because of our faith in Jesus, God treats us as His beloved children and does not use sickness to chastise us. As if it is not enough to say that a loving Father would never inflict sickness on their own son or daughter, Jesus is our example of life as a child of God and as a beloved Son, Jesus was never sick.

God does not teach us about His goodness by being evil. God does not teach us about His faithfulness by being fickle. God does not teach us about His love and mercy by attacking our bodies with disease and torment. Moreover, God has given us a teacher and it is not sickness—it is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is constantly teaching us, leading us in truth, guiding us in paths of righteousness for the Lord's glory, and reminding us of everything that Jesus taught. (See John 14:26.) We have to allow the Holy Spirit to renew our mind, will, and emotions so that we come fully into alignment with God's good will toward us in Jesus.

In the name of “God teaching us,” we will allow ourselves to be diverted by learning techniques, methods, and teachings which are birthed out of trusting in the knowledge of good and evil (including diets, supplements, medications, etc.) rather than righteousness as a free gift from God and healing by His wounds. In our desperate quest to be well, we may acquire lots of knowledge about God and still be sick because we never learn to believe that it is God's will for us to be well. (See 2 Timothy 3:5, 7; Colossians 2:23.) But as we submit ourselves to God and resist the evil one, he will flee from us and so will sickness.

IT'S A MYSTERY

When the enemy pushes people past their ability to comprehend and believe God, they will often say, “God works in mysterious ways,” or “It's a mystery” to let themselves off the hook of persisting in faith.

God does not work in mysterious ways—He works according to His Word. While we don't know everything about God and can still be filled with childlike wonder about Him, we cannot use God's “mysteriousness” as an excuse for not receiving something from Him that Jesus died to give us.

God has revealed the biggest mystery of all redemptive history to us so that we can steward the mystery to the rest of the world. The mystery is this: Jesus died so we can have right standing with God and have the Spirit of the Lord dwelling inside of us. (See Romans 16:25-26; 1 Corinthians 2:7, 4:1; Ephesians 3:4-5; Colossians 1:26-27, 2:2; 1 Timothy 3:16.) The mystery was hidden in ages past, but now it is out in the open! Moreover, God has not locked up His Kingdom and blessings in secrecy and guesswork. We are God's children, and He desires to open all the storehouses of heaven to us. In fact, Jesus calls us His friends because He tells us everything that the Father has told Him and is willing to open up all of the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven to us. (See John 15:15; Matthew 13:11.)

This is why we are encouraged to keep on asking, seeking, and knocking so that we can continue to receive, find, and have more and more of God's goodness opened to us. (See Matthew 7:7-8.) When we do this, we discover that the mystery of God has been revealed and the things that God has revealed have been revealed so that we may do them. (See Deuteronomy 29:29)

HELP MY UNBELIEF

Mark 9:21-24 NIV - Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. "I" has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

DESCRIPTION

Unbelief prevents us from experiencing all of the blessings God has for us, including miracles. It occurs when we consider that our current circumstance is too difficult for God to handle or that our present problem has somehow not been addressed through the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus. This does not mean we have no faith but that our faith has been stretched past our ability to believe.

This said, the free gift of salvation, deliverance, healing, and sustenance is ours to receive by faith. This means that when we have real faith in God, even if it is only the size of a mustard seed, everything is possible to us. We stop fearing anything or even thinking things like, "If you can..." to God because we start to truly entrust ourselves into His hands as our loving Heavenly Father no matter how grim our circumstances may appear to be.

Therefore, to practice Help My Unbelief is about recognizing that even though we have some faith, there are ways in which we are not fully trusting God. Recognizing these areas helps us turn them over the Lord, repent, and build our faith to receive from Him.

PRAYER

Father, I believe, help my unbelief! Show me the ways that I am not trusting you fully or am believing wrong things. Increase my faith in more areas of my life so that I can bring you greater glory. Show me how to exercise my faith by trusting you more in all things. In Jesus' name, Amen.



PURPOSE:

To resist and conquer various forms of unbelief.

To grow in faith and application of trusting God in our lives.

To experience more miracles because of greater faith.

SPIRITUAL FRUIT:

Strengthened faith and faithfulness.

Deeper experience of God's ways and work.

Repentance from self-reliance over trust in God.

Repentance from wrong beliefs.

Purified motives and approach to life.

CONSIDERATIONS

Consider these forms of unbelief, listed in no particular order:

- **Disbelief:** The inability or refusal to believe something. Says things like, "I do not believe that Jesus heals today."
- **Doubt/Unbelief:** Thinking something is too unbelievable to be real or having faith stretched past our ability to believe.
- **Misbelief:** Faith in something that is wrong. Says things like, "Time heals all wounds." Time does not heal, Jesus heals.
- **Self-Righteousness:** Faith in our own record before God rather than in Jesus' perfect record. Believes, "I deserve it."
- **Psychologizing:** Inspecting our past for reasons why we are unable to receive God's blessings. Says things like, "my father didn't love me so I doubt God does." This is the wrong basis for faith altogether. Jesus did not come as a psychologist. He came as a Savior.

PRACTICE

1. Ask the Holy Spirit to highlight one of the unbeliefs above that is relevant to your life right now.
2. Ask the Lord to show you how this unbelief has infiltrated your thoughts. Talk to Him about:
 - When did this unbelief begin? Was there an event which triggered this? Was it from a disappointment?
 - Ask the Lord to reveal to you the real root of the issue. For example, pride, fear, intellectualism, theology, etc.
3. Repent. Ask the Lord to forgive your unbelief.
 - Ask the Lord to forgive your unbelief. Receive forgiveness.
 - Ask the Lord to help you change your approach.
4. Ask the Lord how He wants to help you overcome this unbelief through greater faith and trust in Him.
 - How will He transform your faith and renew your mind? Is there something He is asking you to do to build your faith?
5. Do whatever He says.

NOTES:



ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES:

Unbelief
 Matthew 13:58
 2 Kings 17:15-15
 Psalm 78
 Isaiah 65:2

Faith
 Matthew 19:26
 Philippians 4:13
 Hebrews 11:1, 6
 Romans 10:17
 Mark 11:22-25
 1 Corinthians 2:5
 Romans 4:16



PERSECUTION TO THE END & SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Scripture Reading

Read each of the following passages and then use the chart below for study and reflection.

- The Book of Matthew, Chapter 24
- The Book of Daniel, Chapter 7
- The Book of Revelation, Chapters 13 & 18
- 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

| | |
|---|---|
| General Summary of These Passages: | |
| | |
| Main Themes & Common Message: | Key Verses: |
| | |
| God's Commands to His People: | Questions you still have about this: |
| | |
| How does this change your impressions of the times we live in and the times to come? | |
| | |
| How is God asking you to respond to these passages in your life today? | |
| | |

COUNT THE COST

Luke 14:27-33 ESV - Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

DESCRIPTION

Jesus made the terms of following Him explicitly clear. When we agree to be a disciple of Jesus, we enter in knowing that it will cost us everything, like a king who knows that he does not have enough strength, soldiers, or resources to win the battle or the war. We serve a God who gave up everything and died on a cross for us. The evidence of our understanding of what our God did for us is found in the cost we are willing to pay as we obediently follow Jesus. Jesus imperatively said His disciples must take up our cross and renounce all that we have in order to follow Him. The cross is an instrument of death and as such, disciples must be willing to suffer humiliation, loss, and even pay the ultimate price if God so wills. Not that we pursue sacrifice of our own design but that we position our hearts in readiness to sacrifice whatever might be required of us on our path with God. There is no such thing as a 50% disciple, a good-finesse only disciple, or a have it my way disciple. We must be hot or cold, all in or not in at all.

Practicing Count the Cost is about examining our willingness to follow Jesus, even when it hurts and even if it costs us everything.

Category: Self-Denial

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PURPOSE:

To understand the terms and requirements of following Jesus.

To realistically assess our commitment to following Jesus.

To increase our willingness to give all for Jesus.

SPIRITUAL FRUIT:

Absolute surrender to God and following Jesus.

Increased humility.

Increased readiness to suffer and sacrifice for Jesus and His Kingdom.

PRAYER

Father, thank you for paying the ultimate price for me. Help me to understand the worth of your sacrifice and increase my willingness to give my all for you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

CONSIDERATIONS

Consider the following aspects Jesus alluded to as the potential cost of following Him. Listed in no particular order:

- Hated by family, mother, father for name of Jesus.
- Homelessness: taxes have holes but not Son of Man.
- Losing/giving up all possessions to follow Jesus.
- Persecuted/ridiculed by family, friends, etc.
- Hated by world. Hated by all people.
- Death to self: arrogance, pride, selfishness, "my way," etc.
- Death to flesh: passions, sensual desires, preferences, etc.
- Ultimate price: death, loss of life for the name of Jesus.

TALK WITH GOD

In what ways have you followed God because He gives you what you want or has the power to bless you?

If Jesus never blessed you again, (material blessing, healing, guidance, etc.) would you still want to follow Him?

If you knew that God's purpose was for you to be martyred for Jesus, how would that change your walk of faith?

In what ways have you experienced persecution from family, friends, or others for following Jesus? What is your response?

In what ways have you been called upon to suffer or sacrifice for following Jesus? Did you do it? Joyfully?

In what ways has Jesus asked you to take up your cross and die to yourself or your flesh? How did it change you?

What do you think motivated Jesus to take up His cross? How did He do it? What example does that set for you?

After counting the cost, do you still want to be a disciple of Jesus? Why?

NOTES:



ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURES:

- Matthew 5:10
- Luke 9:58
- Matthew 24:9
- Luke 4:26
- John 15:18-25
- James 1:2-3, 12
- Acts 14:22
- Mark 8:36
- Luke 9:23
- Philippians 2:5-11
- Matthew 6:24
- 1 John 2:1-5-17
- Revelation 3:16

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UNIT FIVE – KEY QUESTIONS

Suffering & Persecution

Use this worksheet to test your grasp of the material and exercises of Unit Five.

| | |
|---|---|
| What is the role of Christian suffering? | |
| | |
| What is suffering for righteousness sake? | What types of trials do Christians face? |
| | |
| What does it mean to take up my cross? | What is the enemy's role in suffering? |
| | |
| What types of suffering are sharing in Christ's suffering? What types are not? | How do believers prepare for the times ahead? |
| | |
| What is one thing you learned that you did not know before? | What questions do you still have about this subject? |
| | |

UNIT FIVE: GROUP EXERCISES

Using the Exercises from Unit Five's classes, have each person in the group ask the Lord to guide them about sharing a **personal** and **current** example.

Choose from ONE of the following:

- From Son of David - Son of Man: One way that following Jesus right now is different than they were expecting.
- From Enemy Tactics: One way that the evil one is attacking them or their faith right now.
- From Help My Unbelief: One way that God is currently challenging them to overcome their unbelief.
- From Count the Cost: One way that they are paying a cost for following Jesus in their life right now.

After each person shares, listen to the Holy Spirit for any words of encouragement and pray for them as a group.

Please be respectful and keep the information they shared confidential within the group. Do unto others as you want done to you.