
The Hard Road to Glory

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a long, hard road with a glorious ending. I learned a great deal about myself and about suffering that year.

How to face suffering well, in a way that causes us to flourish, is my topic here. It may strike you as odd to put “suffering” and “flourishing” in the same sentence. Aren’t suffering and flourishing, by definition, opposites? A key distinction when discussing flourishing, dating back to Aristotle, is the difference between what we might call *hedonic happiness*, which is simply feeling happy, and *flourishing*, living a life filled with purpose and meaning. Psychologist Roy Baumeister conducted a study to differentiate the two, and found that hedonic happiness and flourishing are highly correlated with each other.¹ In other words, living a life of purpose and meaning tends to result in experiencing happy, pleasant feelings. However, he also found that there are some key ways in which they differ. One of these is suffering. He found that reporting many bad events happening in life was associated with higher flourishing, but with lower hedonic happiness. And it turns out that a wealth of research suggests a strong connection between suffering and flourishing, a connection that is so strong that it led prominent positive psychologist Laura King to refer to suffering as “the hard road to the good life.”²

Perhaps this idea that suffering might lead to good things shouldn’t be such a surprise. After all, it’s also an idea that is found in the Bible. Our faith offers a promise from God to work all things (including, one might assume, painful and traumatic experiences) “together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28, New Revised Standard Version). In contemporary Christian discussions of suffering, however, this theme of growth through suffering tends to be overshadowed by a discussion of theodicy: how suffering and evil can exist in a world created by a loving and all-powerful God. This article is not about theodicy. I am less interested in the “why” of suffering than in the “how” of suffering. Ironically, the “how” question seems of more concern to biblical writers than the “why” question which has received so much interest in Christian circles. The books of I Peter, 2 Corinthians, and the eighth chapter of Romans all extensively address the issue of how to suffer.

In attempting to explore how to suffer well, in a way that leads to positive changes, I will look to the resources of our faith, as well as to the ever-growing body of psychological research on growth following suffering. So what does psychology tell us about this topic?



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On November 13, 2013, I accepted an invitation to speak at a psychology conference on the topic of growth through suffering. On December 11, less than one month later, I went for a routine mammogram and was diagnosed with stage 2 breast cancer. The topic of growth through suffering quickly took on more than academic interest! During my long year of treatment, as I spent time in God’s word and researched my topic in the psychological literature, a picture emerged – a picture of

Psychological Perspectives

Several decades of psychological research have documented that people going through a wide variety of difficult circumstances emerge reporting they have changed for the better in some way. But not all people report growth resulting from suffering. Percentages vary, depending on the study, but it is clear that growth is not an automatic, effortless result of suffering. In other words, suffering itself is not the cause of growth. When growth occurs, it tends to be in three interrelated areas: changes in one's general philosophy of life, changes in the one's perception of self, and changes in the one's experience of relationships with others.

and distressed. While painful, this can leave us open to the adjusting or rebuilding of our assumptions in a way that is more accurate, and, consequently, more helpful for living life.

Research suggests that processing the suffering cognitively and emotionally is necessary for growth to occur. In the early days after a traumatic event, this may take the form of intrusive thoughts and rumination. This seems to occur because we are trying hard to grasp the reality of the situation, to understand it. Later, we can process the suffering more intentionally. We may try to figure out ways to cope with the situation, and we may wrestle with the meaning of the suffering. Why did God allow it? What are the implications for my life? For my goals? What about my family? This wrestling is crucial for growth to occur; some studies suggest that the amount of growth is directly related to the amount of intentional engagement with the life crisis.

The implications of this should be noted. Attempts to avoid the suffering or to distract oneself from dealing with the suffering are counter-productive. In fact, it can result in an increase in intrusive processing, a process known as the "rebound effect." Unfortunately, our societal bent, and perhaps our Christian subculture more specifically, is to move quickly away from pain, sometimes through well-intentioned efforts to "look on the bright side." While avoidance may help people psychologically survive immediately after the traumatic event, and periodic distractions can be helpful to cope with the effects of suffering as part of an ongoing process of working through the suffering, processing needs to occur. Friends and family who are willing to listen can be very helpful in facilitating this.

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View of Self

As an outcome of suffering, the most common changes in the view of self have to do with seeing the self as stronger, wiser, and more resilient. People may also report character changes and greater acceptance of their vulnerabilities and limitations. One study found that greater numbers of traumatic events were linked to significantly higher scores on a number of character strengths, including bravery, creativity, kindness, curiosity, and appreciation of beauty.⁵ These character strengths then affect other areas of life.

Relating to Others

Suffering often brings about a greater sense of connection and closeness to other people and valuing others more, as well as a greater sense of compassion for the suffering of others. However, this is not automatically the case. When we allow ourselves to process and accept our own suffering, we are better able to tolerate the suffering of others. When we resist our own suffering, building defenses to keep it away from us, we also build up walls against the suffering of others, since it may bring too close to home our own suffering.

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Philosophy of Life or Worldview

Researchers have concluded that in order for growth to occur in response to a stressful event, the suffering must present a challenge to the person's assumptions about the world, to his or her worldview.³ Worldviews are deep-seated, often unconscious beliefs about the world and our place in the world that give us a sense of order and stability to our lives, structuring the way we interpret our experiences, and providing guidance for our choices in daily life and overall goals. For stressors to produce change, they must shake or shatter these beliefs. For example, my cancer challenged my unrecognized assumption that nothing bad will ever happen to me, that things like cancer "happen to other people, not to me." My diagnosis brought close the reality of death, of mortality, and caused me to face the possibility of a shortened lifespan. The shattering of this assumption allowed me to reexamine and rebuild my assumptions. In fact, several studies have reported that the greater the threat to one's worldview, the greater the reported growth.

Social psychologist Ronnie Janoff-Bulmann describes three deep-seated beliefs prevalent in Western culture that she sees as the primary components of a worldview.⁴ The first is the belief that the world is benevolent. While we know in our heads that bad things happen all the time, we don't expect them to happen to us. We lead our lives as if the world is benevolent. The second belief is that the world is meaningful, controllable, predictable, and just. We get what we deserve. The third is the belief that we are worthy, decent people. These beliefs often exist at a gut level, even when we know differently at an intellectual level. Tragic events in our lives challenge, and sometimes shatter, these assumptions, leaving us disoriented

Theological Perspectives

Does Christianity offer a particular path for enduring suffering? I think the answer is a resounding “yes”! Our faith offers a host of resources for meaning-making that can be appropriated by those who are suffering, and lead clearly to the outcomes found in the positive psychology literature, as well as additional goals outside the domain of psychology.

Our faith addresses the assumption of benevolence and justice by reminding us that we live as fallen creatures in a fallen world, groaning as we wait for our ultimate salvation to be accomplished. It addresses the assumption of control by reminding us of our fragile creatureliness and our utter dependence on God who is in control. And it addresses the assumption that we are good, deserving people by reminding us of God’s holiness and our need for His mercy and forgiveness. In this way, our worldview receives a radical reorientation toward reality.

Fortunately, our faith doesn’t stop there. It also offers us a Savior who shared in our suffering. Suffering is a distinguishing mark of Jesus in Scripture. Long before his birth, he is called “a man of suffering, and familiar with pain” (Isaiah 53:3, New International Version). Though we are not given a glimpse of his internal sufferings pre-Calvary, we know that the circumstances of his life held plenty of occasions for suffering: born in poverty, living as a refugee in another country, growing up in the context of Roman domination, losing his earthly father at a young age, experiencing homelessness, associating with the outcasts in society, being misunderstood by his brothers and mother. Furthermore, as God the Son, he had a choice regarding the circumstances of his birth; he chose to be born into these circumstances. He chose to be the suffering servant; he “took up our pain and bore our suffering” (Isaiah 53:4), casting his lot with ours long before the cross.

of “abiding” in Christ. Christ endured suffering, as he did everything else, through the power of the Spirit. And because of the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to follow that example. So how did Christ suffer, empowered by the Spirit?

First, Jesus did not allow suffering to distance him from the Father. On the contrary, he brought his suffering to God. Hebrews 5:7-9 says, “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (New Revised Standard Version). Sometimes people who suffer turn away from God in anger; Christ’s example encourages us instead to struggle in God’s presence. Peter notes a specific way in which Jesus turned to the Father in his suffering: he “entrusted himself” to God (I Peter 2:23). The verb tense used can be translated “kept entrusting” and indicates that this was a deliberate choice on Jesus’ part.⁶ Jesus kept “handing over” his sufferings to God.

As we follow Christ’s example in our suffering, we become more like him and draw closer to him – a life of “abiding” in Christ.

Second, in response to his suffering Jesus did not sin, but instead displayed the fruit of the Spirit in his responses. He didn’t give in to temptation, but resisted, choosing dependence on the Spirit (Luke 4:1). “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats” (I Peter 2:23, NIV). When attacked, he turned the other cheek. When homeless, he trusted in God to provide for his needs. And the New Testament suggests that Jesus even grew in character through his experiences: the book of Hebrews tells us that he learned obedience through his suffering (Hebrews 5:8), and gained empathy and compassion for us through his suffering (Hebrews 2:18).

Much New Testament teaching calls us to similar responses: forgiving those who injure us, loving and praying for our enemies, responding to violence with non-violence, etc. Suffering offers ample opportunity to cultivate virtues, resulting in the character changes documented in the literature reviewed above.

Third, throughout his life and in all circumstances, Jesus kept a future orientation. He kept his eyes on the goal. And the goal, for him, is summarized most succinctly in that distinctively Christian word, *glory*. There is a pervasive connection in Scripture between suffering and glory. Jesus summarized his own life, as prophesied in the Old Testament, with the words, “Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory” (Luke 24:26)? Summarizing these same prophets, Peter spoke of “the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow” (I Peter 1:11).

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Because of Christ’s sufferings, we have a model to follow in the “how” of our suffering. In fact, we are called to suffer as Christ suffered. I Peter 2:21 clearly calls us to this, “This suffering is all part of the work God has given you. Christ, who suffered for you, is your example. Follow in his steps” (Living Bible). As we follow Christ’s example in our suffering, we become more like him and draw closer to him – a life

The suffering-glory connection is not limited to Jesus. The biblical connection is also made with respect to his followers. Later in the same book, Peter says to “rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed” (I Peter 4:13). Paul picks up on this theme in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18, where we are told “our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” And in Romans 8:17-18 he similarly says, “We share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” It is clear from what Paul says later in the chapter (8:23-27) that included in this suffering is the pain of being human, including the sufferings of the body, and living in the world – not just suffering for being a Christian.

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But what does this actually mean? In spite of having grown up in the church, my first association to the word *glory* is something like a light glowing out from someone, like a light bulb. I find that I’m in good company here. C. S. Lewis wrote, “There is no getting away from the fact that [the idea of glory] is very prominent in the New Testament and in early Christian writings . . . Glory suggests two ideas to me, of which one seems wicked and the other ridiculous. Either glory means to me fame, or it means luminosity . . . as for [luminosity], who wishes to become a kind of living electric light bulb?”⁷

I will try to be brief in describing this important word, which occurs 96 times in the writings of Paul, and 227 times in the New Testament overall.⁸ It turns out that my initial impression of the word is not so far off base, as its primary meaning has to do with brightness, splendor, or radiance. It also has the association of magnificence and fame. In the Old Testament, *glory* was used as a symbol of divine presence, and was usually attached to special physical places where God was visibly present, like the temple, or to special people who served as mediators of God’s presence, like Moses. In the Psalms and the prophets, we are also given a vision of end times in which God’s glory, his radiant, magnificent presence, will fill the earth (Psalms 24, 29; Isaiah 6, 40; Ezekiel 1; p. 73). God’s glorious presence takes form in the person of Jesus, and these eschatological prophecies become intertwined with Christ’s second coming.

In Paul’s writings, *glory* is applied to the believer’s salvation, and more specifically to the sanctification process of transformation and eventual participation in Jesus’ self-manifestation at his second coming. The believer’s process

of glorification, then, is the process of identification with Christ. According to the book of Philippians, this identification with Christ includes participation in his sufferings (Philippians 3:10) and in his resurrection (Philippians 3:21). So in presenting suffering as linked to glory, Paul is pointing out the role that suffering can play as we increasingly know and identify with Christ – including, significantly, with his suffering – and become conformed to Christ’s image and anticipate our ultimate transformation into glorious Christ likeness. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 3:18, “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

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A key aspect of the transformation into Christlikeness seems to be reaching the end of our resources, recognizing our limitations, our mortality, our helplessness. This paves the way for turning to God’s Spirit, learning to depend on him. Christ depended on the Spirit; we become like Christ when we do likewise. This emphasis on the helplessness of suffering as an essential element of growth is exemplified in Paul, whose struggles with God regarding his “thorn in the flesh” led to God’s own clarification that “my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Our weakness leads us to increased recognition of our dependence on God, indwelling us in the Holy Spirit.

What is Suffering Well?

How do these psychological and theological pieces come together? The psychological literature notes the importance of meaning-making in suffering; our faith gives us the resources for meaning-making, highlighting the link between suffering and glory. The psychological literature notes changes in relationships; the Bible encourages us to bring our suffering to God, cultivating a relationship of dependence on our *Abba* Father.

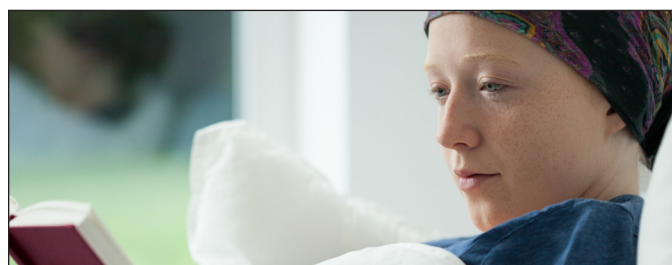


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The psychological literature highlights the possibility of character change; we are instructed by Scripture to cooperate with the Holy Spirit to pursue conformity to Christ’s image. As we grow in our dependence on the Holy Spirit, we show the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. And the resulting life of dependency on the Holy Spirit, “abiding in Christ,” walking in his footsteps through hard places, grows us in the day-to-day closeness of

intimacy with Christ. The result is a closer approximation to what we will become when Christ makes all things new—a glorious reality of union with Christ by the power of the Spirit.

The psychological literature also gives some clues as to why suffering can lead to glory.⁴ Significant suffering offers an accelerated learning opportunity in the sanctification process, in (at least) two ways. Our assumptions of control are shattered so that in our helplessness we learn, like Christ, to be completely dependent on God's Spirit. It is noteworthy that with the shattering of assumptions, the acute sense of helplessness is linked with the greatest growth in the post-traumatic stress literature. Only in this state do we fully recognize ourselves as creatures before a powerful God – but a God who is also merciful and loving. In the second place, our assumptions that the world is benevolent are shattered. We learn that bad things happen – not just to other people, but also to us. We learn more deeply that the world is broken; we hear its “groaning,” to use Romans 8 language. Our false hope of heaven on earth is destroyed. This may help us to cling less tightly to our present lives, freeing our hearts to hope for what is to come. In this way, the possibility emerges of following the example of Christ in keeping his eyes on the glory to come. While still living gratefully in the present moment, the full weight of our happiness no longer rests on our current circumstances.

But the biblical story of suffering doesn't end here. There is one result of following Christ in his suffering that goes significantly beyond anything described in the psychological literature. Because of Christ, we can actually not just endure, but rejoice in our suffering.

Let me be careful here to clarify that this is not a masochistic kind of getting pleasure out of the pain of suffering. Instead, the rejoicing is tied in closely with the goal of suffering as identification with Christ. For example, in 1 Peter 4:13, Peter says, “But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ...” Paul talks about delighting “in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties.” And the reason is “so that Christ's power may rest on me . . . for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). Elsewhere he actually talks about suffering as a privilege. In Philippians 1:29 Paul says, “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.”

Why is suffering such a gift? Only because of its link with Christ! Because of Christ, our suffering can be made holy, full of meaning and purpose. Suffering is a gift in which we can rejoice because it moves us toward the goal of knowing Christ, depending on Christ, identifying with Christ, and participating in his glory. Paul expresses this passionately in Philippians 3:10-11, “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”

I return here to C. S. Lewis, who after exploring the notion of glory, teases out its implications: “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal . . . it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit – immortal horrors or everlasting splendors . . . your

neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses, for in him also Christ *vere latitat* [lies hidden] – the glorifier and the glorified, Glory Himself, is truly hidden.” At the end of the day, I, for one, can say that the hard road is worth it.

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