

**Trusting God When It Hurts**  
**Part #1 How Can Suffering Be A Privilege?**

*Delivered at Central Baptist Church on January 1, 2017 by Pastor Kevin Thiessen*

Text: Phil 3:7-11

7But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— 10that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

**Context:**

Scripture clearly attests to the **reality of human suffering**. It is a central element in the curse associated with the Fall in Genesis (Genesis 3:16–19), and it's not going to end until after Jesus Christ's second coming when he fully inaugurates His Kingdom. (Revelation 21:4)

Suffering generally stems from the misuse of human freedom. It originated from Adam and Eve's choice to disobey God's command (Romans 5:12–14), and the consequences of their sin led not only to human suffering but also to suffering for all creation (Romans 8:18–22). Given the Fall and people's continuing sinfulness, suffering is an ordinary and expected condition of earthly life (Job 5:7; 14:1; Ecclesiastes 2:23; John 16:33).

But suffering is not purely pointless or gratuitous. The Bible sets suffering in a broader and higher context: suffering can be used for the will and purposes of a benevolent God. The Bible affirms that God works all things together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose in Romans 8:28. It also identifies personal benefits of suffering, such as cultivating virtuous character (Romans 5:1–3; James 1:3–5). Though others may inflict suffering for their own evil purposes, and though suffering may befall us as people living in a fallen world, **God can bring good from suffering nonetheless** (Gen 50:20).

\*Great! So suffering is to be expected ... but how in the world can it be a privilege?!

*This is our topic for today, and as we take on this challenging question - I hope to work through a few points as we work towards an answer to this question – how can suffering be a privilege?*

1. Suffering loss can be good for us. (Phil 3:7-8)
2. Suffering can turn us toward Christ.
3. Suffering can transform us. (Phil 3:10)

Story: Dr. Helen Roseveare

Dr. Helen Roseveare, a famous English missionary to the Congo, recently passed away at the age of 91.

I had the privilege of meeting Helen, and shared some time with her in Dublin. She spoke at our church for Holy Week in 2006 and spent the week teaching us about suffering. Though at first I saw an 'old grandmotherly' looking lady ... once she started speaking I was captivated, just like everyone else in attendance. Dr. Roseveare was a powerful speaker, and her life, testimony and message was both gut-wrenching and tear-jerking ... but also awesome.

At an early age Helen resolved that one day she would be a missionary. Growing up in the church and doing all the things young Christians were supposed to, she would later say that her understanding of Christianity was more head knowledge than heart engagement.

In the winter of 1945, the Lord seemed to meet her in a personal way during a college student retreat. She gave her testimony on the final evening, and Bible teacher Graham Scroggie wrote **Philippians 3:10** in her new Bible, and told her:

*Tonight you've entered into the first part of the verse, "That I may know Him." This is only the beginning, and there's a long journey ahead. My prayer for you is that you will go on through the verse to know "the power of His resurrection" and also, God willing, one day perhaps, "the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death."*

She felt an increased sense of calling toward missions, and publicly **declared** during a missionary gathering in North England, **"I'll go anywhere God wants me to, whatever the cost."**

Helen spoke about how she had it out with God saying, "Ok God, today I mean it, go ahead and make me more like Jesus, whatever the cost. But please (knowing herself fairly well), when I feel I can't stand anymore and cry out, 'Stop!' will you ignore my 'stop' and remember that today I said 'Go ahead!'"

She received her doctorate in medicine from Cambridge and then studied for six months at the Worldwide Evangelization Crusade so she could be a missionary in Africa. In 1953, at the age of 28, Helen arrived in Congo.

In the first two years, she founded a training school for nurses, training women to serve as nurse-evangelists, who in turn would run clinics and dispensaries in different regions.

In October 1955, she was asked to transfer seven miles away to run an abandoned maternity and leprosy center in Nebobongo. Working with local Africans, Helen helped to transform the center into a hospital with 100 beds, serving mothers, lepers, and children, along with a training school for paramedics and 48 rural clinics. Outside of these facilities, there was no other medical help for 150 miles in any direction.

The Congo became independent from Belgium in 1960, and civil war broke out in 1964. All of the medical facilities they had established were destroyed. Helen was among ten Protestant missionaries put under house arrest by the rebel forces for several weeks, after which time they were moved and imprisoned.

She describes the horror of what happened after she tried to escape:

They found me, dragged me to my feet, struck me over head and shoulders, flung me on the ground, kicked me, dragged me to my feet only to strike me again—the sickening searing pain of a broken tooth, a mouth full of sticky blood, my glasses gone. Beyond sense, numb with horror and unknown fear, driven, dragged, pushed back to my own house—yelled at, insulted, cursed.

Her captors, she wrote, "were brutal and drunken. They cursed and swore, they struck and kicked, they used the butt-end of rifles and rubber truncheons. We were roughly taken, thrown in prisons, humiliated, threatened."

On October 29, 1964, Helen Roseveare was brutally raped.

She later recounted: On that dreadful night, beaten and bruised, terrified and tormented, unutterably alone, I had felt at last God had failed me. Surely He could have stepped in earlier, surely things need not have gone that far. I had reached what seemed to be the ultimate depth of despairing nothingness.

In this darkness, however, she sensed the Lord saying to her: "You asked Me, when you were first converted, for the privilege of being a missionary. This is it. Don't you want it? . . . These are not your sufferings. They're Mine. All I ask of you is the loan of your body." She eventually received an "overwhelming sense of privilege, that Almighty God would stoop to ask of me, a mere nobody in a forest clearing in the jungles of Africa, something He needed."

She later pointed to God's goodness despite this great evil:

Through the brutal heartbreaking experience of rape, God met with me—with outstretched arms of love. It was an unbelievable experience: He was so utterly there, so totally understanding, his comfort was so complete—and suddenly I knew—I really knew that his love was unutterably sufficient. He did love me! He did understand!

She also wrote:

[God] understood not only my desperate misery but also my awakened desires and mixed up horror of emotional trauma. I knew that **Philippians 4:19**, "My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus," was true on all levels, not just on a hyper-spiritual shelf where I had tried to relegate it. . . . He was actually offering me the inestimable privilege of sharing in some little way in the fellowship of His sufferings.

This theme of "privilege" became prominent in Helen's ministry. In her **Urbana '76 address**, she said:

One word became unbelievably clear, and that word was privilege. **He didn't take away pain or cruelty or humiliation.** No! It was all there, *but now it was altogether different.* It was with him, for him, in him.

In the weeks of imprisonment that followed and in the subsequent years of continued service, looking back, one has tried to “count the cost,” but I find it all swallowed up in privilege. The cost suddenly seems very small and transient in the greatness and permanence of the privilege.

Though she did leave for Northern Ireland once released, Helen returned to Africa after not-too-long in 1966, she soon left Nebobongo to establish a new medical center in Nyankunde in northeastern Zaire, producing a 250-bed hospital, maternity ward, training college for doctors, a center for leprosy, and other endeavors.

There, too, she experienced several trials and relational difficulties. She never claimed to see visions or hear the voice of the Lord, but she did sense him rebuking her attitude. On one occasion, her conviction from the Lord went as follows:

You no longer want Jesus only, but Jesus plus . . . plus respect, popularity, public opinion, success and pride. You wanted to go out with all the trumpets blaring, from a farewell-do that you organized for yourself with photographs and tape-recordings to show and play at home, just to reveal what you had achieved. You wanted to feel needed and respected. You wanted the other missionaries to be worried about how they'll ever carry on after you've gone. You'd like letters when you go home to tell how much they realize they owe to you, how much they miss you. All this and more. Jesus plus. . . . No, you can't have it. **Either it must be “Jesus only” or you'll find you have no Jesus.** You'll substitute Helen Roseveare.

In 1973, Helen returned to the UK for health reasons, settling in Northern Ireland. She traveled, wrote *several books*, and served as a missionary advocate.

*I received Helen's obituary last month. Her testimony was pivotal for my choosing of our text today, and the stimulant for preparing this message. Even in the brief time I knew her, I learned so much from Helen, and am grateful to have known her. When I first came to Central I had hoped to invite her to Victoria to share her story and learned insights on suffering with us, but sadly at 86 she was no longer able to travel.*

*But let us return to our text and begin to unpack how suffering can be a privilege.*

### **1. Phil 3:7-9 Suffering loss can be good for us. (Eliminate our self-righteousness.)**

**But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ** – In relation to Christ, Paul's Jewish credentials (of which he had many) and status mean nothing – and even worked against him by blinding him to God's plan of salvation in Christ.

*Like many Jews – Paul was zealous, but he recognizes that it was misplaced, for example killing Christ followers, because he did not recognize God's work. Through much of his ministry he warned his fellow Jews that some of them were wrongly pursuing a right relationship with God through keeping the law – as he formerly did. Paul recognized that Christ is the end of the law – he had fulfilled it – and only faith in Him could make humanity right with God.*

In verse 8 Paul intensifies his previous statement with “the loss of all things”: Not just his Jewish identity and credentials, but **everything is a disadvantage compared to knowing the Messiah.**

*Like Helen – do you want Jesus plus? I gotta tell you – it can be fantastic to get away from the ‘rat race’ – to be removed from the pressures and anxieties of keeping up our reputation, success, performance, etc. I recognize that some of us love it – maybe are even addicted to it – we may not even notice ourselves slipping into needing Jesus plus power, authority, wealth, status, reputation, etc. We love to be needed, or missed when we're not available. We feel good when people owe us. We don't even realize we can be substituting ourselves for Jesus.*

*This is why I'm so grateful to God for the opportunity to see different cultures, because it offers a chance to see life through a different lens, and as I speak today because this particular lesson I learned most starkly when visiting the country of Malawi. The people were so happy, despite the fact that they had ‘so little’ from a first world perspective. As Paul suggested – the Malawians lived out this reality - they did not have the **disadvantage** of possessions, wealth, reputation, and resources to keep them from knowing and depending on Christ. For some antagonists*

*against Christianity – they think that this supports their accusation that Christianity is for the simple and feeble-minded. In some ways they are absolutely correct --- Jesus encourages us to have the faith of a child ... but the faith, passion, and experience of God within these people I've not experienced in a "advanced and sophisticated" first-world context. Their depth of faith and intimate fellowship with Christ, even in their present sufferings has steeled them because they have experienced God's faithfulness and provision in a way that we rarely have access to because in many respects – we can seemingly take care of our selves.*

In verse 9 Paul touches on "righteousness" and there are a range of associated meanings with the term he uses in this verse ... including ethical uprightness, right legal standing before God, right relationship with God, covenant faithfulness, vindication, and deliverance. Regardless of how the term is understood, Paul's usage here concerns the function of righteousness to designate God's people – the righteous. Those who put **confidence in the flesh** rely on the law for righteousness; in contrast, Paul has come to rely on Christ.

***\*Suffering loss can be good for us when it helps us to eliminate our own self-righteousness and cause us to rely on Christ.***

## **2. Suffering can turn us toward Christ.**

In the Old Testament – God warns his people about the consequences of disobedience *often*. In Deuteronomy 30, he encourages his people to **choose** life, that you and your offspring may live ... and what did "choosing life" look like: **loving** the Lord your God, **obeying** his voice and **holding fast** to him, for he is your life.

Today, there is an ongoing tendency for fallen people, *including* Christians, **to freely choose disobedience** and suffer as a consequence. God, in extreme circumstances, uses suffering as judgment on His covenant people and the sinfulness of other nations (Jeremiah 30:14; Daniel 9:16; Amos 1-2). **This suffering is meant to turn people back to God and call on Him for deliverance.**

*Isn't it interesting how often people turn to God in times of suffering? They may have ignored him at every other point in their life ... but when life gets out of their control – they look to something beyond themselves to intervene.*

*I admit that I have often felt closest to God when life has been it's most challenging and difficult. I've had other friends who would distance themselves from God when life was difficult. Yet for me, I think it has a lot to do with the first point made today – because in difficult moments I utterly need him and depend on Him to carry me through the current situation. But it doesn't always have to be utter life crisis ... I've experienced this when tree planting (not the easiest job!), or when alone and searching for my life's purpose & calling in Northern Ireland, or when experiencing a crisis of faith because of the hurt and betrayal of fellow Christians while in full-time ministry. (give example) At each point, Christ's presence was tangible – his love was physically warm – his peace was penetrating. These and many other experiences are the pillars upon which my faith has been cemented.*

*I wonder what pillars hold up your faith in Christ? Or, if your faith is shaking, what pillars are holding your beliefs up ... are they possibly reliant on your 'keeping the law' or doing good things or doing things on your own strength and ability to be right with God? Sadly, but truly, those pillars will never stand up on their own.*

*You know what's even more beautiful, we are not alone in our suffering. The Bible teaches that God shares in our suffering. **The incarnation most clearly portrays this; Jesus takes on flesh and shares in the fullness of the human condition, even unto a brutal death on a cross.*** As you can read in Hebrews 12:2 – Jesus is the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Paul also comments on this in Philippians 2:7–8, reminding his audience that Jesus emptied himself, by taking on the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

*This is one of the most powerful (and constant) reminders for me ... we do not believe in and serve a Savior who is detached and simply **sympathetic** ... rather he is **empathetic** – he understands – he knows – and he went through all we can and have experienced and more. And he went through all of that for us ... because he loves His Father, and he loves His creation – us. He did all this to redeem us – to ransom us – to rescue and restore us to a right relationship with the Father God.*

***\*Suffering can turn us back toward Christ both when we recognize our need for him, and when we realize that he understands and knows what we're going through. We turn back because we know we can make it***

***through the trials and challenges with him and the power of His Spirit within us.***

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**Issue:** People always want to know why things happen. I regularly talk with people who are questioning why God allowed something terrible to happen to them, and it often breaks my heart. Sometimes we just don't know the answer. We can say it's sin, the depravity of man, and we would be telling the truth. God didn't cause one person to sin against another. But when you're hurting, or traumatized in some cases, you might think to yourself, "I still don't understand."

That's where faith comes in. It doesn't matter how big or how small whatever it is that has taken place in your life. Something small to others could be big to you, so take it all to Jesus and trust that He hears you and already knows everything you're going through.

### **Psalm 62:8**

**6 He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.**

**7 On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock, my refuge is God.**

**8 Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.**

**Side Note: How do we help those who are suffering?**

Of course we should say things like:

1. God's punishing you!
2. Enemy is attacking you!
3. God is using you as an example!

Of course ... not! As Philip Yancey helps us see in his book *Where is God When it Hurts*, **our words usually don't help**. In the Bible we see that sometimes "comforters were tormentors", especially in the book of Job, where his friends offer neat little pious theories of why God is doing this or that.

So how can we help?

- Validation: If you feel angry or upset ... it's okay, God can handle it.
- Secondly, who did it right – who helped well? Yancey describes the grandma who simply came alongside and offered a practical demonstration of love and comfort that people need. Questions like: "What do you need?" or comments like, "I've known hurt too" along with the power of being present can be a good place to start.
  - But please, don't be a Job's comforter.
- Finally, help them remember the promises and faithfulness of God.

"Trust is not a passive state of mind. It is a vigorous act of the soul by which we choose to lay hold on the promises of God and cling to them despite the adversity that at times seeks to overwhelms us."

**- Jerry Bridges, Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts**

### **3. Suffering can transform us**

*I hope you are starting to see the potential privilege of suffering. In Philippians 3:10 we get some even deeper insight from Paul. He refers to "sharing in his (Christ's) sufferings." Paul seems to recognize that suffering – especially for the gospel – brings deeper fellowship with Christ. Paul sees his ministry as an extension of Jesus' ministry, portrayed in Isaiah 53's account of the Suffering Servant. I encourage you to read through Isaiah 53 ... it's not a typical character description for someone who is going to be the Savior of the whole world.*

Suffering, especially when it is done for the sake of the gospel, serves as a mark of our identity as children of God. In Hebrews 12:7, the author reminds his readers that it is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? Again in Hebrews 12:11, "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." Or, 2 Corinthians 4:17 which reads, "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." **The implication throughout these passages is that the benefits outweigh the costs that arise from discipline.**

"That which should distinguish the suffering of believers from unbelievers is the confidence that our suffering is

under the control of an all-powerful and all-loving God. Our suffering has meaning and purpose in God's eternal plan, and He brings or allows to come into our lives only that which is for His glory and our good."

— Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts*

## Illustration: The Movie Hoosiers

### Story: The Master Potter

Ultimately, the New Testament, including this brief passage from Paul in Philippians, portrays suffering as an expression of our **unity** with Christ's sufferings. This helps to advance the cause of the gospel, both through the example of those who endure ... and through what it teaches the person who suffers.

*Back in Philippians 3:10, Paul desires to emulate the self-emptying love that Jesus displayed on the cross. Paul anticipates that being conformed to Christ's death will lead to new life in the power of Christ's resurrection. He knows he hasn't arrived at this ultimate goal - and knows this pursuit will not be finished until he is dwelling with Christ in the age to come.*

*Though God works his good purposes for people in this present age, **the ultimate reconciliation and redemption of suffering await a future time**. As we'll hear in a couple Sundays, Paul's colleague Peter also gave an exhortation for people to trust God with their lives—even in the midst of suffering—and points explicitly to the justice of God's judgment upon Jesus' return. There is definitely an "**already—not yet**" aspect to the resolution of human suffering. **Though Christ provides believers with strength for transforming suffering in the here and now, ultimate resolution of human suffering awaits His return.***

***\*Suffering will transform us as we are united with Christ's sufferings – and as we are refined, shaped and molded into his image.***

### Concluding Thought: Suffering will end.

\*The resolution of suffering, mourning, and grieving is one of the most repeated promises of God's future blessing for His people.

Isa 35:10 – And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Isa 65:19 – I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress.

Rev 21:4 – He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

***\*Suffering loss can be good for us when it helps us to rely on Christ.***

***\*Suffering can turn us back toward Christ both when we recognize our need for him, and when we realize that he understands and knows what we're going through. We turn back because we know we can make it through the trials and challenges with him and the power of His Spirit within us.***

***\*Suffering will transform us as we are united with Christ's sufferings – and as we are refined, shaped and molded into his image.***

*Finally – and praise God – one day, suffering will come to an end, when Jesus Christ returns and inaugurates His Kingdom!*

### Benediction – Hebrews 13:20

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.