

Overcoming Difficulty & Suffering

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First off, you guys have all played the game “Rocks, Scissors, Paper”, haven’t you? And you all know that rock breaks scissors, scissors cuts paper, and paper covers up and defeats rock. By the way that reminds me, you know how during flu season you go to shake somebody’s hand and they just give you that fist bump. The next time you have your hand out and they give you that fist bump and that’s kind of awkward, just go over and cover their hand and go, “Paper beats rock.” Or don’t. Now here’s the message. In some ways the way you and I...oh, let me say this about “Rock, Paper, Scissors” first of all. The secret is if you knew what the other person was going to do, you’d always win, huh? If you knew they were going to show scissors, you would know to show rock. So, if you knew what was coming, you’d always make the right choice and you’d win. Now in a lot of ways how we, as Christians, deal with suffering and hardship is the same thing. There are three basic sources of suffering or hardship or pain that come into your life and they are:

1. The Judgment of God
2. The Discipline of God
3. Satanic Attack

And if you know the source of your difficulty then you’ll know what you should do. There is a different response for every condition. So, that’s what we’re going to look at today. We’re going to look at how to deal with that. But let me tell you a little parable. There were three brothers and they were going to go on a sailing vacation. They got on their boat. They’re going to be gone for a couple of weeks but on the first day they got five or six hours out and there was an engine fire and their boat sank and the three brothers are now in a little dingy out in the middle of the sea. And the one says, “God is judging us. We’ve got to figure out and we need to repent so that God will save us.” And the second brother says, “I don’t think you’re right at all. I think that God is disciplining us. And God wants us to learn to depend upon Him and what we need to do is just endure this joyfully and learn the lesson.” And the third brother says, “You’re all wrong. This is an attack from the devil.” Now, which of them is right? And it’s not all three. These are three different things. Which of those brothers is right? Well, the answer is we can’t know because we don’t have enough information to be able to tell that.

Have you ever wrestled in your life with a problem or condition in your life and you ask yourself, “Why is this happening? How should I respond?” And you think, “Is this a demonic attack? Is this discipline? What exactly is going on?” So, are there any tests to help us to know how to respond? I want you think about a problem in your life or a difficulty and let’s take a look at it. And you probably asked yourself, “Why is this happening?” And so, we’re going to look at the three basic sources that cause suffering in the Christian’s life. If you open up your bulletin, we have a 3-page worksheet, if you will, because I want you to be able to take this message home and follow up on it or even at your home group you can follow up on it. So, let’s go ahead and look at the three basic sources. First of all, the source of suffering can be God’s wrath or judgment.

1. Judgment: Source = God's Wrath

For God to be righteous He must oppose all unrighteousness. How many of you know there is no sin in Heaven? For God to be righteous He's got to come against all unrighteousness and sin. He can't simply ignore it or accommodate it if He's holy. And so, all sin must either be judged or atoned for.

2. Discipline: Source = God's Love

God loves us as we are but He loves us too much to leave us as we are. And so, God loves us and He wants us to become conformed to His image and the image of His Son, Jesus, and He wants to promote us and give us good things. But in order to do that, He has to help change us.

3. Spiritual Attack: Source = Satan

You have an enemy. Jesus said his desire is to steal, kill and destroy. He wants to hinder your growth and hinder you from receiving what God wants to give you.

Now when we know the source, then we'll know how to respond. We'll look at that in a minute. So, let's take these three apart a little bit and look at them a little bit more in depth. First of all, let's look at suffering and hardship that comes because of judgment on sin.

1st Category: Suffering and hardship that comes because of judgment of sin.

If God did not actively oppose wrong, he would not be absolutely good and trustworthy. (Ex 34:6-7, Col 3:25, Prov 28:13)

The Bible is very clear, God judges sin. Now right out of the gate, I want to make a quick distinction here on judgment. There is **general judgment** and there is **specific judgment**. What's **general judgment**? That's the judgment that came on the world when Adam and Eve sinned. And, so we have sickness, we have death, we have genetic problems and that's just something that's a part of life. You know the Bible says that God causes the rain and the sun to fall on the just and the unjust because He's gracious and created a good world but, at the same time the world has come under judgment. And, so just as we share with everybody the sun and the rain, we also share with everybody sickness and genetic problems. So, when you encounter sickness or when you discover that you have cancer, you don't have to first of all go looking around saying, "What did I do wrong? Why am I being judged?" So, there's general judgment that's on the whole human race. But there's also **specific judgment** that we can earn on our own through our own sinful behaviors. So, that's what we're going to be talking about. Specific judgment, not general. In Exodus 34, God reveals who He is and listen to what He says about Himself. Moses had asked Him, "God, tell us who you really are." And God does. He speaks of Himself in the third person.

EXODUS 34:6-7

6 Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7 who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; (Now you're going to get no argument from anybody about that picture of God. Everybody's very comfortable with that part of God. But there's more) yet He will by no means leave the

guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.

So here we see both sides of God. He is merciful but He's also just. He is forgiving but He also judges sin. Now what is sin? Most of you know. The word in the Greek in our Bible is "harmartia". It comes from the world of archery. It means to miss the mark or fall short of the mark. God's mark or God's standard in every area of life is listed for us in the Bible. So, sin is falling short of God's standard. Now, do you know there is only two kinds of sin in the world? Did you know that? Only two. The first kind is there is sin that is confessed and repented of and therefore forgiven. And the only other kind of sin there is is sin that must be judged. God judges sin. He will be by no means leave sin unjudged. That's what He said, "I will by no means leave it unjudged." So, those are the only kinds of sin that there is. There is no third category. Stuff that used to be sin but isn't anymore because you have to keep up with the times. Sin that God winks at or sin that God ignores. There's only two kinds. So, judgment is a reality. And, the purpose of God's judgment is to hinder the growth of evil and to teach everybody a lesson. Because when we see judgment happen on sin, how many know everybody learns a lesson. And, we learn the importance of doing right and the cost of doing wrong. I have on your worksheets a number of biblical examples of judgment on sin:

- Adam and Eve cast from garden - Genesis 3
- Moses not allowed to enter the Promised Land - Numbers 20
- Death of David and Bathsheba's son - 11 Samuel 12
- Death of Ananias and Sapphira - Acts 5
- Destruction of Jerusalem (70 AD)

I put those there so you could study those at home.

COLOSSIANS 3:25 (NASB)

For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.

The NIV says, "... that without favoritism." So, judgment on sin is true for the Christian as well as the non-Christian. There is no favoritism, it's without partiality. It doesn't matter if a person belongs to a church or a person was raised in a Christian home or your great, great grandfather was a preacher. None of that matters because sin that isn't abandoned and confessed will be judged. So, we know that some suffering by Christians is judgment on sin. Any sin that we don't abandon is not forgiven. So, Christians that continue in a pattern of willful sinfulness, that sin is not forgiven and therefore that sin must be judged. Let's look at Proverbs 28:13.

PROVERBS 28:13 (NASB)

He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion.

And so, I can hide my sin from others, I can lie to myself, I can justify it, but I cannot escape the consequences of judgment on continued sin. Now, you can appeal to the fact that everybody else is doing it or the times have changed. But how many of you know that God doesn't consult polls? God doesn't change with the times. God's word is forever and eternal.

And so, that's important that we understand that. So, therefore if we live by the world's standards, then we're judged along with the world.

When I was in high school, I had given my life to Christ and become a Christian. In fact, I was raised in a Christian home. But when I got out into high school I had all the wrong friends and so rather than making the right friends and do the hard thing, I just drifted with them and began to party and drink and smoke pot and just living a very ungodly lifestyle. And, judgment came on me. And that is that God lifted His presence from my life. He lifted the light. And I just went deeper and deeper into darkness until I got into full-blown alcoholism and I was demonized and I was suicidal. How many of you know when God takes His grace off your life—that's judgment? Now thankfully that judgment woke me up and I turned towards the Lord. But many Christians suffer and their hardships are because of judgment on sin. And so, what's the proper response? If you look at it and you find out that your problem, your suffering is because you are walking in persistent sin, then what you need to do is repent of that sinful behavior and turn to God. Now let's look at the second category.

2nd Category: Suffering or hardship because of God's discipline.

God disciplines us to correct fruitless beliefs and behavior and bring us to a fuller image of His Son.

(Heb 12:5-6, Heb 12:11 [Living Bible], Rev 3:19, Rom 8:28-29)

He wants us to have a more productive and wonderful relationship with Him. He wants us to know Him better and depend on Him more. And so, He brings discipline into our lives. Now whereas judgment results because of God's wrath, discipline results because of God's love.

HEBREWS 12:5-6 (NASB)

... and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, Nor faint when you are reproved by Him; 6 For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, And He scourges every son whom He receives."

And so, discipline is a sign of His love and it's a proof that you've been adopted as His son or daughter, that He cares about you, and that He believes in what you can become. I thank my parents that they disciplined me. It wasn't pleasant at the time but guess what? It taught me things like self-control. It taught me to reverence God. It taught me to defer gratification. It taught me to treat others with respect. It taught me the joy of being productive. And so, I thank them for that. Hebrews 12:11 tells us God is a good parent.

HEBREWS 12:11 (NIV)

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.

So, discipline deals with character development and faith. It allows us to be more than we were, to do more than we did, to become what we really want to be in the image of Jesus. Then Revelation 3:19, what a great verse.

REVELATION 3:19 (NASB)

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.

And so, those whom I love, I discipline. Some of the most productive and defining years of my life were also the years when I was disciplined by God. God led me to go to a liberal college and a liberal seminary where I was persecuted for my beliefs. It was difficult. While there I spent a year as a resident manager, actually living in a rescue mission and that was a difficult year. Sometime a little later, I was out of the ministry and spent 2 ½ years driving a taxi. Those were difficulties that God brought into my life but they were the most defining and fruitful times of my life. They were the preparation that enabled me to become the pastor of this church. He dealt with attitudes and thinking that I had that wouldn't have been fruitful and would have tripped me up. So, let's look at some biblical examples of discipline:

- **Moses' 40 years in Midian - Exodus 2:11-22**
He had to take care of somebody else's sheep. But it was a difference between being the spoiled Prince of Egypt and the man of God that took God's people out of Egypt toward the Promised Land.
- **Joseph's enslavement imprisonment in Egypt - Genesis 29-31**
- **Jacob's years serving under Laban - Genesis 29-31**
- **Paul's thorn in the flesh - 2 Corinthians 12:7-10**
- **Jesus prunes fruitful branches - John 15:2**

So, if what you're dealing with is God's discipline, what should your response be there? To judgment, what do you do? You repent of the behavior and turn towards God. But if it's God's discipline, what do you do? You lean into God's strength because he wants to give you strength to get through the test, you embrace the process gratefully... Why do you embrace it gracefully? Because the Bible says, "***Consider it all joy, my brethren when you encounter various trials knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance***" and it goes on from there. So, you embrace it gratefully because it's from God... and you pray for understanding so that you can learn and grow. Now the secret of getting through trials is to value the prize enough so that you can embrace the process. And what's the prize? It is maturity. It is fruitfulness. It is to be promoted. It is to begin to be more Christlike. If you keep your eyes on the prize then you can endure the process. Let's look now at the third category which is spiritual attack.

3rd Category: Suffering and hardship because of spiritual attack.

Satan's purpose is to hinder God's purpose in the life of the believer and keep us from full victory.

(1 Peter 5:8)

Now Satan's purpose is hinder God's purpose in your life. It's to defeat you so that you are kept from the fullness of God's victory that He has for you. And it's to smother the Christian under confusion, under despair, under doubt, under fear. That's what he wants to do. 1 Peter 5:8 we read these words.

1 PETER 5:8 (NASB)

Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

And so, the Bible says right here you have an adversary and he's coming after you. Here's some biblical examples of spiritual attack that I've listed you could study:

- Satan tempts Eve by introducing doubt and confusion - Genesis 3
- Answers to Daniel's prayers slowed by demonic warfare - Daniel 10
- Jesus tempted in wilderness by Satan - Matthew 4
- Woman with sickness caused by demonic spirit - Luke 13
- Satan thwarted Paul's attempts - 1 Thessalonians 2:17-18

So, you could read those later. So, if you are under demonic attack, what should the response be? It should be to submit completely to God, and then resist and rebuke the devil.

JAMES 4:7 (NASB)

Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will (because he must) flee from you.

And it says we are to resist the devil but first we have to do something else. What's that? Fully submit to God. The authority you have over Satan is the authority that flows through you from God. And if we're not on the right ground with God, then that authority is affected and our conscience is affected. And so, the first thing you want to do when you're under spiritual attack is look at your own life and see if there's any areas where you aren't really submitting yourself fully to God. And then you need to rebuke him. Never be intimidated by the enemy. You know what it says here? It said (we just read it) Satan goes about like a roaring lion. A lion's roar is the most intimidating sound in the world. Lions rarely have to attack anything because their roar defeats all their enemies. So, Satan intimidates. If you're a Christian and you're right with the Lord, Jesus has taken the teeth right out of the lion. So, don't be intimidated. Do what Jesus did. Jesus rebuked. Jesus commanded Satan, "Get behind me" and that's how we deal with spiritual attack. So far what we've done is we've seen that the suffering that we have comes from one of three sources.

1. The judgment on sin
2. God's loving discipline
3. Demonic attack

And then we saw for the three different sources there are three different responses and we'll go back at the very end of the message and review those. But how can you tell which of these sources it is? And so, I want to give to you now three tests that you can use in your own life to determine the source of your suffering or your hardship or your difficulty.

3 Tests to discern the source of your hardship or suffering:

1. **Test of Life Context** (What was the context of your life when the problem started?)

In other words, what were you doing or what was going on in your life when this problem or hardship came upon you?

Judgment comes when we live in persistent sin and resist the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Judgment comes when we're living in persistent sin and we're resisting the conviction of the Holy Spirit. That's what I was doing in high school and into my early adult years. I was resisting the conviction of the Holy Spirit. When I went out and did it, I felt bad, but I pushed that conviction away and I continued to go on in my sin.

Discipline often comes when we become distracted, independent or stagnant.

Discipline is different. Discipline often comes simply because we've lost focus and we're no longer moving ahead in God. We're not being fruitful like we used to be. We have become independent, maybe we have developed some bad attitudes. And so, God wants to refocus us. He wants us to move ahead in life. He wants to purify us. He wants to enlarge us. So therefore, He must discipline us.

Spiritual attack often comes when we are fruitful and making spiritual progress.

Spiritual attack, however, is something very different. Spiritual attack comes because you *are* being fruitful and because you *are* making spiritual progress. And Satan wants to derail your effectiveness and your progress. Now I just want to say one quick thing. I'm talking about spiritual attack. I'm not talking about spiritual bondage. I think you know they're two different things. Spiritual bondage is something a person falls into because they're continuing in sin to the point that Satan gets a huge advantage over them and they become in bondage. But spiritual attack is something different. That comes from the outside because you're making progress. I'll give you an example. When our schools were going strong, they were growing, we were changing lots of lives, so, we had to expand. We had to find someplace new. And so, we acquired a property in Fletcher Hills and it was the most amazing thing. We were making advance, we were doing good work and (excuse my language, well it's literal) all hell broke loose against us. It was incredible the opposition that arose. But what did we do? We persevered and went through it because it was a demonic attack and our schools were placed there. Satan can't defeat you. He can try and intimidate you.

2. Test of Goals, Priorities and Motives.

In other words, when this problem started, what were your goals and your priorities?

Judgment comes when our goals and priorities are idolatrous.

So much so that they were leading you to sin. In other words, an idol is anything that you love more than God, that you look to more than God, that you serve more than God. A lot of people say, "Oh man, no, I love God more than these other things." But you look at their checkbook, you look at their day planner, their schedule. You find out what they're really excited about, what they're really committed to. And so, when our goals and priorities are idolatrous, we're putting things before God, that's when judgment would happen. On the other hand...

Discipline corrects us when our goals and priorities are mixed or unfruitful.

Discipline comes to correct us not when we're living in sin but when our goals and priorities are mixed or unfruitful. Even though we're Christians we're still influenced in our values and our thinking by the world. I sometimes tell people, "I believe God has your heart but the world has your mind because you have worldly thinking, worldly philosophy and worldly values." So, your heart and your mind are at war. And so, God needs to discipline us

sometimes to begin to change our thinking. And also, a lot of times we can do the right thing for pretty mixed reasons or even wrong reasons. God wants to purify our reasons and so that's when discipline would come. On the other hand...

Spiritual warfare comes against us when our goals and priorities are godly.

On the other hand, spiritual warfare comes to hinder godly goals. So spiritual warfare would tend to come if you had godly goals and you had godly priorities and you were moving ahead.

3. Test of Effects.

In other words, what is the effect that this difficulty is having on your life?

Spiritual Attack brings about confusion and discouragement. It demoralizes us.

If it's spiritual attack, spiritual attack always results in confusion. It results in discouragement, in shame, in doubt. And I say shame because the word 'devil' means accuser or slanderer. 'Satan' in the Greek means adversary and that's the devil. He's our adversary and he's also our accuser. So, when you're dealing with confusion and shame and despair, that could be spiritual attack. Spiritual attack leads to being demoralized. On the other hand, discipline is entirely different.

Discipline brings us to new insight and results in growth.

The effect discipline has is it makes us not become demoralized but it makes us examine ourselves. It makes us re-evaluate. It reveals pride. It reveals wrong thinking. It brings insight. It results in growth and you are experiencing Christ in the midst of it. You don't feel cut off and despairing, you are often times drawn closer to Christ (usually).

Judgment results in sorrow unless or until it turns us to repentance.

Judgment always results in great sorrow. Judgment always brings sorrow and it looks hopeless until you repent. That's what happened to me. I was living in despair and sorrow until I repented.

So, if it's spiritual attack you'll feel completely demoralized. If it's judgment, you'll feel sorrow. But if it's discipline, you'll feel the presence of God and you'll feel hope.

To help us discern the source of our suffering and hardship can require trusted mentors to help us ask the hard questions.

So, we've talked about finding the source of sorrow and problems in your life. Now to be sure what it is (in other words, to make sure you get the right answer) you need to bring people into your life, mentors to go through and ask the hard questions. How many of you know sometimes people ask harder questions on ourselves than we do? How many of you know that every person has a blind spot? Every one of us has blind spots in our lives. So, if you're going through something difficult, you want to try to figure out what the source is and what you should do, invite pastors or mentors or home fellowship leaders or godly people to go through the process with you.

So now, you have a diagnostic tool for yourself and others to go through the problems and difficulties of life, and try to figure out what the problem is. Because once you know the diagnosis, then you know the prescription. Right? So, if the diagnosis is that you're just

reaping what you sow, this is just *judgment*. Then what's the prescription? You just need to repent and stop that behavior and look to God and begin planting good seeds. If you plant bad seeds, you're going to get a bad harvest. And it's so easy in this world to plant bad seeds because we listen to the world. The world says sexual immorality is not an issue. But if we continue to live in racial hatred or we continue to live in unforgiveness, or we just continue to be a gossip and we won't change, we're going to reap a bad harvest which is a judgment. If what we find out instead what we're going through is *discipline*, then what do we do? We just lean into God knowing that He's going to give us strength for the test. We rejoice in the promised outcome and we just pray for strength and patience. And if it's a *spiritual attack*, what do we do? First of all, make sure you are submitted to God. And then you resist, you stand fast, you rebuke the devil, you say, "Get behind me, Satan!" Now God doesn't want His sons and daughters to walk around in confusion, to be thrown this way or that way. He wants us to walk in victory. He wants us to have understanding about our life and to have the wisdom to know what to do next. And so, in order to do that, we need to understand sometimes why it is we're going through something. God wants you to live in victory. Romans 14:7, I'll close on this. It says, *the kingdom of God is righteousness, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit*. We've all been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of His beloved Son. When you were saved, you were transferred from the kingdom of darkness, that's Satan's realm, to the kingdom of God, which is Jesus' realm. And in that realm, it says, its essence is righteousness, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit or empowered by the Holy Spirit. It's the joy the Holy Spirit brings forth. It's the peace the Holy Spirit gives us. And that's your inheritance. That's where God wants us to live. Not in despair but righteousness, joy and peace.

Heavenly Father, we just thank you for your goodness, Lord. I just want to thank you, Lord, although life is a puzzle, thank you, Lord, that you give us the answers. Thank you, Lord, that the Bible is the box top that tells us what the picture is supposed to look like, that gives us guidance and understanding. And Lord, as we go through the challenges of life, I pray for every person in this room that they will understand the issues and the forces of their life; they'd understand the sources of the difficulty. Lord, they'd be encouraged to respond in faith and to get the blessing. Lord, I pray you just break hardship, break attack. I pray you release in this upcoming year blessing in the life of every person in this room. Lord, may they look up, may they see You, may they walk in close fellowship with You this year. In Jesus' name, Amen.