

George couldn't believe it. His tooth was loose. Now it is common for a child to notice that a tooth is loose. It is even exciting to wiggle it more and more until it finally falls out, because then the child gets to put the tooth under his pillow hoping to wake up in the morning and discover that some money has replaced the tooth. The child doesn't worry because he knows that there are more teeth, adult teeth, that are pushing the baby teeth out. But George was 22 years old. He already had his adult teeth. And now one was falling out.

And that wasn't the end of George's teeth problems. Not only did one tooth fall out, but another became loose and fell out, and then another and another. Within 2 decades, George would only have one tooth left - a lower-right bicuspid.

And it wasn't even George's loss of teeth that caused him his greatest discomfort. It was the succession of horrendous dentures that he was subjected to. Typically carved from ivory or elk's teeth, George's dentures were always hinged with tightly wound steel that made the dentures spring open. George had to constantly bear down with his jaw muscles just to keep his mouth shut. Eating and speaking were difficult. George was in constant pain. He tried to marinate his dentures every night to deodorize them, but the only seeming effect was to turn them black.

Finally, George decided that he had to try a new dentist so he went to Dr. John Greenwood. Dr. Greenwood pulled George's last tooth. He then made him some new dentures that didn't have a hole in them for George's final remaining tooth. But that even didn't seem to help much, and George continued to live his life in daily, constant pain. And Dr. Greenwood even kept George's tooth.

If George hadn't been in such a public position, maybe it wouldn't have been so hard on him. But George couldn't afford to go for very long without his dentures. You see, George was the first president of the U.S. He had luncheons to attend, speeches to give, diplomats to welcome. And he lived every single day of his adult life in constant pain because of his teeth or I should say lack of them. In fact, you can still see that last offending tooth of George Washington in the New York Academy of Medicine where Dr. Greenwood's descendants reluctantly donated it in 1937.

As you know, reading biographies and studying anecdotes from people's lives is as hobby of mine. I have found that I can learn great lessons from experiences that others have gone through. And one constant that I have found in studying the lives of people of great character is the thread of suffering that ties them all

together. I would challenge you to find a person who influenced this world for the good with admirable character who did not suffer in some way or another in his or her life. I haven't found one yet. And I have come to the conclusion that this coincidence is not happenstance. For there are lessons taught through suffering that cannot be learned in any other way.

Even the Lord Jesus Christ, the only perfect person ever to live on the face of this earth, had to suffer.

In Hebrews 2:10, we find these remarkable words: *In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.*

A couple chapters later in Hebrews 5:7,8, we read these words which are also remarkable, *During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.*

Now I don't pretend to know everything that these verses are implying. It is important to note that the word translated *perfect* in Hebrews 2:10 literally means *complete or finished*. It does not carry with it the idea of moral perfection. Jesus never sinned. So suffering was not essential in his life to have any kind of cleansing effect. But the Bible makes it clear that suffering was not an option for the Lord Jesus Christ. He had to suffer. He had to suffer because certain aspects of his life could never have been complete without suffering. If the Son of God had to suffer in order to reach his full level of maturity, how much more is suffering essential in our lives if we are to reach our full level of maturity in the Lord Jesus Christ.

During these past Sunday mornings, we have been looking together at different problems of life that we all share with the goal of seeing what the Bible has to say about learning from these life problems. Today, we come to this most important and practical matter of learning from suffering in life. We are going to ask David to speak to us about this subject and help us in our quest.

Now we all know that David lived a glorious life in many ways. He was the king of Israel for several decades with all of the luxury and honor that went with that position. So we are not going to paint David as a poor, deprived individual - for that would not be historically correct.

But it is also true that David went through severe periods of suffering in his life. And it was these times of suffering, more than the times of victory and glory, that molded David's character to be a man after God's own heart.

Psalms 22 is clearly a Messianic Psalm for there are passages contained within it that could only apply to the Lord Jesus Christ himself. But this doesn't lessen David's suffering as recorded in it. Poetic literature

allows for figurative speech. Not every statement in poetry is designed to be taken literally. And we are not claiming that David literally suffered everything that he writes about in this Psalm:

*David undoubtedly felt forsaken by God at times, but we know that God never really did forsake his servant.

*We don't know of any time in David's life when all of his bones were out of joint, or when he was poured out like water, but he evidently felt that way some time in his life.

*We don't know of any time in David's life where his hands and feet were pierced or when he could count all of his bones.

*We don't know of any time in David's life when the enemy stole his clothing and gambled it away between them. But David in his account here betrays the depth of his feelings of suffering. David was suffering greatly when he wrote this Psalm. He was suffering physically, he was suffering emotionally, he was suffering spiritually.

*Now what is absolutely amazing and again evidences the Bible to be the inspired Word of God is the fact that the Holy Spirit could take these words that David wrote with poetic license and apply them literally to the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ. For Jesus Christ suffered all of these in a very literal sense.

*Jesus Christ was forsaken by God the Father when he became sin for us on the cross of Calvary.

*He was poured out like water when the blood flowed from his veins through his open wounds and his bones were jerked out of joint hanging upon the cross of Calvary.

*Christ did have his hands and feet pierced - the Roman soldiers did cast lots for his garment. And this reminds us of the divine nature of God's word and the fact that we had better take God's word very seriously.

We must be reminded that the Bible is God's word. Nobody could have humanly written these kinds of details that David wrote a thousand years before the fact about the sacrificial death of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is just impossible. And if the Bible is God's Word, then we have better take it very seriously. For when God speaks, we had better be quick to listen.

Now for our purposes this morning, I want to direct your attention to David's attitude during his time of intense suffering. This Psalm makes it clear that David was suffering greatly at the time of its composition. But David's attitude is amazing to us. In the midst of his suffering, David sang out in praise to the Lord. Notice what he wrote in verses 22-24:

22 I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you. 23 You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel! 24 For he has

not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.

Now there is nothing that is more honoring or glorifying to God than for one of his children to praise him in the midst of suffering. It is exalting to God because it is so unnatural. There is nothing that is natural about giving praise in pain. Complaining - yes. Griping - yes. Becoming depressed - yes. We can understand all of those emotional responses because they are natural - people do them all the time. But praising? That is not the norm. But that is just what David did. And I want you to notice 3 reasons why he praised the Lord in the midst of his suffering with me. They are all found in these 3 brief verses. And it is important that we see these clearly. For we had all better prepare ourselves for suffering - it is something that we all share in common. And what a privilege it is to be able to glorify God through our sufferings following the examples of David and the Lord Jesus Christ who glorified God in theirs.

1. First, David was able to praise God in the midst of his sufferings because God doesn't despise or disdain the sufferings of his afflicted ones. READ 22:24a

24 For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one;

*The Hebrew word translated *despise* here has the idea of regarding something or someone with contempt - thinking that something or someone is worthless, without any value.

*The word translated *disdain* has the idea of being detestable, gross, something that turns your stomach.

*When many people in the world look at someone who is suffering, they tend to regard them as of little value, being pretty much worthless at best, and at worst, they think of the suffering as being gross, turning their stomachs. That is because suffering is not valued by the world. Beautiful people in the prime of their health are what are valued by this world. If you think that I am overstating the case, let me just ask you when the last time was that you saw someone who was obviously suffering on a T.V. ad or advertisement that wasn't promoting a pain reliever. And even on these ads, beautiful people are the ones who are featured. Beautiful people have nothing to do with driving a car. People who are suffering drive cars too. But who are used to sell cars? It's simply because suffering is considered to be worthless at best and gross at worst by so many in the world because depth of character is considered to be of such little value in the world in which we are living today.

God has a different view of suffering. God values suffering as something that is extremely precious. God considers suffering valuable because he knows all the good that it accomplishes in the lives of his children. So God never considers his children to be worthless or gross when they are going through

suffering. God treasures his children who are suffering. He considers them to be of great value, because He has the ability to see all of the character refinement that is being developed in the life of his suffering child.

2. In the second place, note with me that God doesn't hide his face from his children who are suffering.

*For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; **he has not hidden his face from him.***
22:24

Now there are many in the world who would deny that they consider suffering to be worthless or gross because they want to come across as being compassionate people. Their defense against suffering is to just ignore it, hide their face from it. Just pretend that it isn't there.

What made Jesus different from so many others in his day - even his own disciples - is the simple fact that he stopped to notice those who were ill and suffering as he walked through life. There were many beggars who sat on street corners or on the steps outside of the temple in Christ's time. And most people walked right by them as if they weren't even there. They treated them like a tree or a shrub. Oh, some might toss a coin in their cup once in the while - enough to allow the beggar to meet out a meager existence, but for the most part they were totally ignored by society. They were like the religious leaders who crossed the road to pass by the wounded Samaritan on the road of Jericho pretending that he wasn't there. But Jesus was different. He didn't just walk right by them. He stopped and talked with them. He treated them like people. He recognized that they had feelings. He showed compassion and concern for them. As important as his healing touch was the fact that he didn't just ignore those who were suffering.

God doesn't ignore us when we are suffering. God doesn't hide his face from us. Rather, God comes through for his children in their greatest time of need. God doesn't ignore suffering. He doesn't pretend that it's not there. Rather God recognizes the value of suffering and works in the lives of his children so that they can get the most out of every situation in life, no matter how difficult it is.

But it wasn't just important to David what God didn't do in his times of suffering. Certainly, the fact that God didn't despise him and didn't turn away from him was important. But notice that David gives a 3rd reason as well.

3. God listens to the cries for help from his children in the midst of their suffering.

*24 For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him **but has listened to his cry for help.***

David recognized this fact - so he praised God in the midst of his suffering. David realized that God did not regard him as worthless when he was suffering, God did not think that he was gross, and God

did not run away from him and hide in embarrassment or because he just didn't want anything to do with someone who was suffering. But rather God was attentive to him. God's ears were tuned to David's needs. As David asked for help, God heard him and answered his prayers. When David was at his worst, God was at His best. And this brought great confidence into David's life that caused him to sing praises to God publicly - in front of the whole congregation.

A slight chill was in the night air as Wes Anderson climbed into his silver sedan on March 7. The burley 34- year old pastor of the Carmichael Christian Church in Sacramento, California had just finished a board meeting. Wes had been studying criminal justice in college when he felt the call of God to the ministry. After his training in Bible College, he had come to the small congregation at Carmichael as a single pastor and was having a good ministry there. As he was driving home, Pastor Anderson saw one of his widowed members, 78 year old Dorothy Hearst, locked in a 3 car fender-bender. Wes stopped to help and was immediately relieved to find Dorothy only slightly shaken up. Suddenly, Pastor Wes saw some fast-approaching headlights. *Dorothy, that car's going to hit us* he screamed as he shoved her out of the way of the station wagon that slammed into his right side.

Just before he was wheeled into the operating room at the University of California, Davis, Medical Center, the surgeon whispered in his ear. *There's no other way to say this. We're going to have to take your right leg.*

Shortly after the surgery, Pastor Anderson felt an agonizing cramp in his right calf. He reached down to rub the area, but there was nothing there. It was phantom pain. And each time he felt the sharp, shooting pains, he was reminded of the leg that wasn't there, all because of a drunken driver who would spend only 8 months in jail. Life wasn't fair, he thought. Here he was only trying to help a widow in need, and he had lost his right leg.

As the weeks passed, Pastor Anderson experienced some deep depression. Words that he had often used in counseling came back to his mind - *God always has a plan, trust in His will* - but he found those words shallow, hard to accept. When a reporter came requesting to write his story, Wes hesitated at first. He didn't feel like having his story told. But then he knew inside that it was the right thing to do - perhaps God would use it in some way.

Virginia Bruegger picked up the March 16 edition of the Sacramento Bee to unwind after a tough day. Her car hadn't started that morning, and the day had followed in suit. But she was intrigued as she saw an article entitled, *Pastor loses leg saving Woman from Car Crash*. She especially noted the reason the reporter gave for Anderson allowing the article to be written. *Perhaps my story might help someone get*

back spiritually on track, Wes had said. Virginia stopped dead in her tracks. She had been brought up in a religious home, but had strayed from the Lord for many years now. She knew in her heart that she needed to get back in fellowship with the Lord. So Virginia read the entire article several times.

As he awakened from his 7th surgery, Wes Anderson didn't recognize the woman at his door with a potted ivy plant in her hand. *I just came by to say thank you*, Virginia said. *I read the article in the paper and it changed my perspective on life. I knew that I needed to get back into fellowship with the Lord.*

Virginia continued to visit Wes in the hospital on a regular basis for the 2 months until he was discharged. They continued to see each other after Wes had gotten out of the hospital. And on May 27, 1995, 14 months after Wes Anderson's tragic accident, Wes and Virginia were married in that small chapel at the Carmichael Christian Church in Sacramento, California. In the wedding ceremony, Pastor Michael Cook spoke from the text in Ecclesiastes to a packed church, *2 are better than 1. If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up.*

Now it would be far easier if I could conclude the sermon by saying that all suffering ends in a storybook ending where everyone lives happily ever after. But we have all suffered enough to realize that not all suffering ends in marriage. Nor do we even see the good that comes out of much suffering that we endure. So we must live by faith not by sight. For God promises to bring good out of every circumstance in our life as we love him. But part of the good is our realization of who God is and the growth in our relationship with Him. For as David found, through suffering we also realize that God doesn't despise or disdain the sufferings of his afflicted ones, nor does he hide his face from him, but he listens to their cry for help.

But there is another sense in which all suffering for the child of God will eventually end in a storybook ending. For in spite of all that the Apostle Paul suffered, he wrote in Romans 8 just before he penned that great promise that God works all things for God in the lives of those who love Him, *for I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.* (Rom. 8:18)

Suffering is inevitable. Suffering is painful in every way. Suffering is a problem that we all share in common. But we can learn many life lessons from suffering. So like David and Paul, we can praise God even in the midst of our sufferings. And we can look forward to an eternity of glory that will be made even more precious because of what we have suffered here on earth and the fact that there will no longer be any suffering and any kind in heaven.