

## 4

## UNIT FOUR

# ACCEPTING SUFFERING, PART 1

How God is Involved in Your Pain

## UNIT ASSIGNMENTS [JRNY.org/g5-4](http://JRNY.org/g5-4)

- Listen to the audio message *God's Provision*
- 21 Days of Personal Worship
- Complete *My Spiritual Journey So Far* by this week

# TRUTH

## ► BY MEMORY

*“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”*

**ROMANS 8:18 (NIV)**

## ► IN BIBLE

Last week you took a deep look at temptation, which is one of the consequences of The Fall. You saw that God is not the author of evil or temptation. God has provided several strategies that will guard you against the enticements of your sinful nature. Hopefully you have taken steps to address your specific temptations with those strategies. As you do, the Holy Spirit will sanctify you steadily so that you find the frequency and degree of temptation slowly decreasing over time.

This week, you will begin the first of three units that address another consequence of The Fall – suffering. Suffering cannot be avoided. It is a fact of life for fallen people living in a fallen world. It has been said that if you are not suffering at this moment, you will be, so you should use the present opportunity to prepare for that inevitability.

This first unit will help you prepare for suffering by helping you understand how and why God is involved in suffering. If you use the **IN BIBLE** scriptures in your personal worship, be sure to include the elements of **PRAISE**.

**PRAAY FIRST** : **READ THE TEXT** : **ASK QUESTIONS** : **INTERPRET IN CONTEXT** : **SUMMARIZE APPLICATIONS** : **ENGAGE WITH GOD**

**EXODUS 4:10-13** – In this conversation with God, Moses raises an objection against going to speak for God to Pharaoh.

How does God answer Moses' objection? What does His answer tell you about His involvement with suffering?

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**JOB 2:10** – This verse records Job's interpretation of the tragic events that entered his life.

According to this verse, who brought suffering into Job's life? Was he correct? Why or why not?

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**ISAIAH 45:1-7** – This prophecy concerns the Persian King Cyrus, who allowed exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem from Babylon around 536 B.C. This allowed them to rebuild the Temple that the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed in 586 B.C. [Note: Isaiah's ministry spanned over 60 years from the 740s B.C. to around 680 B.C.]

What is God's purpose in using Cyrus as His instrument? What do these verses, especially verse 7, tell you about God's involvement with suffering?

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**JOHN 9:1-4** – This passage records Jesus' answer to a question about who is responsible for the suffering of a man who was born blind.

According to Jesus, who is responsible for this man's blindness? For what purpose was he born blind?

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**ROMANS 8** – This important chapter will be the focus of the next three units of material. Among the topics Paul addresses here are the love and providence of God, Spirit-filled living, our adoption as God’s children, our position as co-heirs with Christ, suffering and future glory. You should read the whole chapter at least once a week for each of the next three weeks.

Paul says that Christians will never be condemned by God. Scan the chapter to find out why. You should be able to find at least three reasons. [Note: Pay attention to the question in verse 34.]

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Look closely at verses 16-18. What do these verses tell you about how suffering relates to glory?

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Look now at verses 19-23. What do these verses tell you about God’s involvement with suffering?

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**1 PETER 1:3-9** – Peter wrote this letter to Christians who were suffering persecution at the hand of the Roman Emperor, Nero. The purpose of the letter is to provide a reason to endure Nero’s cruelty, rather than deny Christ and reject their faith in Him.

What reasons do you see in these verses to endure persecution in particular, or suffering in general?

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## ► TO SUMMARIZE

A few weeks ago you learned that the consequences of The Fall could be summarized by the words *sin* and *misery*. *Sin* describes the internal human moral condition that bends our desires to break God's law. It is the root cause of all our temptations. *Misery* describes our experience of life in a world cursed by God. You also learned that the miseries of the world are classified by the terms *moral* and *natural evil*. Because of these evils we suffer pain, disease, death, sorrow, grief, and fear.

But where is God in our pain? Is He involved in our suffering? Does He control it? Why doesn't He stop it? These probably aren't new questions for you. You have probably asked them during some painful episode in your life. How do you answer them? Did you shrug them off, unable to understand what God was up to? Or, did you find answers that satisfied you during your difficult time? More importantly, did your conclusions take into account everything the Bible has to say about suffering, or just part of the story?

Imagine that you are getting reacquainted with a friend you haven't seen in years and he is telling you about his life since you lost contact. He's been very successful professionally. He recently celebrated 25 wonderful years of marriage to his high school sweetheart. He shows you a picture of 3 beautiful children; one of whom recently graduated from a very prestigious college. As he shares, you can't help but compare his life experience to yours and you begin to feel a bit discouraged as you think about the financial struggles you've had. You know you can't provide the same kind of opportunities for your kids. His life seems to be so blessed compared to yours. But while you're thinking about this, he continues with another side to his story. One of his children has caused him and his wife unusual pain because of her rebellious ways. You learn that the stress of that situation has eroded his wife's mental health. And on top of that, your friend has recently been diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. By now, rather than feeling

jealous of him, there is no way you would want to trade places with him. Your perspective has changed because you heard the whole story.

In reality, the tough questions about suffering and how God is or isn't involved in our suffering can't be answered well without understanding the whole story. If you base your personal theology about suffering on only part of the story, you are bound to come to conclusions that will ultimately fail you when suffering knocks on your door. For example, some people become so focused, even obsessed, with their emotional or physical pain that they miss the comfort of a God who loves them and has only their ultimate good in mind. Others buy into a Christian escapism that is so commonly preached today believing that God redeemed them so that they would experience nothing but good things in a life free from pain and sorrow.

The goal of this material is to help you build a theology of suffering that avoids the obsession and denial that spring from knowing only half of the story. Think of a good theology of suffering as a blanket or cloak that warms you when the winds of suffering blow cold and strong. A good theology of suffering will comfort you when you ask "Why?", and will support you when you don't hear a reply to "How long, O Lord?" Let's see now where God is – what God is doing – when you suffer.

As you studied the **IN BIBLE** passages this week it should have become clear, at the very least, that God is involved in suffering. Perhaps this surprised you. Perhaps you thought God wasn't involved – that Satan or fate controls our suffering. But God seeks no such excuses. He clearly revealed His involvement in suffering when He asked Moses, "*Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?*" (Exodus 4:11). Hundreds of years later, He made this truth even more evident through Isaiah, "*I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things.*" (Isaiah 45:7).

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Now, if this was all we knew, we might have good reason to despair. But God tells us more about suffering, especially the suffering endured by Christians. In Romans 8, Paul makes it obvious that for the Christian, there is a direct correlation between suffering and glory. When speaking of the Christian's position as God's children Paul writes, *"...and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him."* (Romans 8:17). This verse shows what God's purpose is in your suffering – restoring the glory that was lost by The Fall. When you first trusted Christ, an initial deposit (so to speak) of glory was restored in your soul. As you walk with Christ through various trials, you are being transformed *"... from one degree of glory to another."* (2 Corinthians 3:18). And finally, after death you will receive an imperishable body that will be robed with glory for all eternity (see 1 Corinthians 15:42-44).

God's good purpose of restoring glory in us gives Christians an encouraging consolation during times of suffering. Paul said, *"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us."* (8:18). So, Christians can take comfort in knowing that the eternal glory to come will utterly outshine and outweigh all present suffering. Paul illustrates this truth with the example of childbirth. Though great suffering always precedes childbirth, it is quickly forgotten when a mother beholds the glory of the new life that she brought into the world. We observe a similar phenomenon in Olympic athletes who, despite the hardships of training, endure to the end and rise to victory. In both cases the reward is considered worth far more than the cost of the suffering that was

endured. If you compare your suffering with the relative ease of someone else you'll find yourself obsessed with your troubles – jealous of God's plan for others and doubting His love for you. But if you set your eyes on the glory to come, your suffering becomes manageable and you can even rejoice in the good purpose God is working in you.

The fact can't be escaped that all people, Christians included, will experience suffering in this world. Nature shared in humanity's curse and so we experience the misery of living in a cursed world. All of creation has been *"...subjected to futility..."*, and enslaved to corruption (8:20-21). In this personification of nature, it experiences the *futility*, or frustration, of not being as it was made to be. It was designed to be a world of life and peace under the stewardship of humanity. But, instead the world is a place of life, and death and violence. Still, the curse will one day be lifted and creation will one day share in man's glorious future. *"... Creation itself will be set free from its bondage..."* (8:21) and at the end of the age God's kingdom will reign over a new heaven and a new earth.

For the present, there will be suffering. And there is a difficult question to wrestle with. Is suffering under anyone's control? If so, who controls it? If you had your choice, what would you rather have? – suffering that is totally out of anyone's control, mindless like a F5 tornado? Or, would you rather have suffering be under someone's control? Most likely, you'd want suffering to be controlled; but, by whom? – Satan? Would you want Satan to have free reign to make you suffer for his own diabolical purposes? Or, would you rather that the God of love and wisdom control your suffering and make it work for the ultimate purpose of restoring His glory in you?

Now, this is not a popular theology – with non-Christians or many Christians. Most people’s understanding of God’s goodness is too simplistic to be reconciled with this teaching. They don’t have any proof to the contrary. They just don’t like it, and won’t believe it. You may be having the same struggle right now. This is tough! How can a good God be in any way connected with the suffering of people that He supposedly loves? Yet, this is what you read from Genesis 3 onward. Moses made this undeniable when he wrote, “*See now that I, even I, am He, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal.*” (Deut 32:39). In this fallen world, God controls who gets sick, who gets well, who He miraculously heals, and who He doesn’t. Jesus said of the man born blind, “...

*this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.*” (John 9:3). In other words, God oversaw this man’s blindness and his healing in order to make His glory known through him.

Do you trust God enough to accept both suffering and blessing from Him? Can you say like Jesus, “Thy will be done,” secure in the knowledge that all His intentions toward you are full of love and grace and glory? The key to accepting suffering is to become enamored with God and His glorious design for you. Knowing that God controls your suffering in order to restore His glory in you is the honey that makes the bitter pill easier to swallow. But if you let suffering cause you to doubt God’s unconditional love for you, you neglect the warm cloak that could comfort you in the storms of life.

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# EQUIPPING

Memorize the five Major Prophets of the Old Testament. You can also use this memory aid:

"I (**Isaiah**), Jerry (**Jeremiah**), lament (**Lamentations**) over finding it so ez-to-kill (**Ezekiel**) Daniel (**Daniel**)."

Keep reviewing what you have memorized so that by the end of this series you can recite all 39 books of the Old Testament and all 27 books of the New Testament in your group meeting.

If the teaching this week was difficult for you to process, use the space below to journal your thoughts and questions. Try to respond to specific **IN BIBLE** scriptures or specific points made in the **TO SUMMARIZE** section. You will have an opportunity to discuss your thoughts in your group meeting.

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# ACCOUNTABILITY

Before your Journey Group meeting, use the questions below to examine your life in light of the truth you explored this week.

**Are difficulties in your life causing you to trust God more or less? Are you growing in reverence for His righteousness, goodness, and love?**

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**Describe the quality and consistency of your personal worship this week.**

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**Share an application of Scripture you made to your life this week.**

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**Did you pray with your spouse this week? Is prayer an important part of your relationship?**

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**What, if anything, disappoints you most about your spiritual journey so far?**

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**How did you engage in Christ's mission this week?**

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# MISSION

## ► DIALOGUING

*“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...”*

**—ROMANS 1:16, ESV**

Remember that the Christian’s mission is to take up Christ’s mission to make His gospel known through word and deed. During this section of *The Journey* you are focusing on an approach to sharing the message of the gospel in a non-threatening, conversational way. At the same time, don’t forget to continue the daily habit of praying for people on your prayer list and to be involved serving the least and lost across the street, track and ocean however God gives you opportunity.

So far in this series you have learned a conversational approach to introducing *The Answer* and the *Life Issues* booklets. See if you can repeat the outlines here.

Introducing *The Answer*

- 1 .....
- 2 .....
- 3 .....
- 4 .....

Introducing the *Life Issues* booklets

- 1 .....
- 2 .....
- 3 .....
- 4 .....



# SUPPLICATION

*<sup>5</sup>“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my salvation <sup>6</sup>and my God.”*

– PSALM 42:5-6 (ESV)

*<sup>38</sup>“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, <sup>39</sup>nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

– ROMANS 8:38-39 (ESV)

When you find yourself in the midst of trials, look up. Spend some time praising and thanking God. Praising Him for all He is and all He has provided for you. Thank Him for His love for you. If you aren't presently in a trial, ask God to prepare you for the suffering that will come by giving you a deeper sense of His power over all things and His great love for you.

My prayer request regarding the truth for this week:

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My prayer request regarding a situation in my life:

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*“Can we wish,  
if it were  
possible, to  
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path strewn  
with flowers  
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was strewn  
with thorns?”*

— JOHN NEWTON

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