

# The Joy of Suffering

by Joni Eareckson Tada

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*The sermon explores the idea that suffering can be a ministry, and that God's purposes in suffering are to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ and to remove sin and bad habits from our lives.*

**Duration:** 58:34

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:33, John 10:10, Romans 8:28, 1 Thessalonians 5:18, James 1:2-3

**Topics:** "Suffering"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares a powerful story about a young man named Rick who became paralyzed after a fight at the age of 15. Despite his physical limitations, Rick was determined to continue his education and achieved a 3.0 average in college. His mother played a crucial role in helping him communicate by creating an alphabet chart above his pillow. The speaker also reflects on his own journey of searching for purpose and identity in high school and how he found his way through joining a sports team and attending a young life weekend camp. The sermon emphasizes the importance of having faith in God and challenges the misconception of a distant and score-keeping God, highlighting the true nature of God as revealed in the Bible.

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## Transcript

In the 10 years that I've been in this wheelchair, and I guess this year will be almost 11 years, I've learned an awful lot about God's purposes in suffering. I've learned a lot about, well, about the ministry of suffering. Now that sounds, I know, a little unusual that suffering should be a ministry, but I believe for Christians we have the confident and the very relaxed assurance that all things really fit together into a pattern for good, to us who love him who created us, and who allows things to happen to us, whether they be awful things or things that make us smile.

And I want to share with you a little bit about the ministry of suffering in hopes that it might equip you with a better understanding of perhaps why God may be allowing your own handicap, whatever it might be. I guess the best place to begin in sharing this whole idea of suffering with you is to begin with telling you a little bit about my life, and my family, and my home, and the kind of atmosphere I grew up in. I grew up in a type of family that loved the outdoors.

We used to ride, and camp, and hike, and play tennis, and I used to raise and train horses, and it was a real spiritual dimension in my childhood. I always heard about how much God loved me. But as a young child growing up, I kind of conjured up an image of God as being some kind of great grandfather in the

sky.

I imagined God to be up there in a big rocking chair, sitting before a gigantic chalkboard, and I imagined that all I needed to do as a young child was simply keep the Ten Commandments, and live a good life, and honor my mom and dad, and go to church regularly, and I would win brownie points with this great grandfather in the sky. And I imagined that he chalked on this chalkboard all of my good points and all of my bad points, so that when I would stand before those pearly gates, I figured that he would weigh the pros against the cons, and the goods against the bads, and I figured that if I lived a pretty good life, open he'd swing those heavenly gates, and then I'd walk toward heavenly bliss. That's what I thought being a Christian was all about, just keeping score with this God in the sky who was sitting before a gigantic chalkboard.

Well, that might be a young child's image of who God is, but that is not the God of the Bible. And I learned that at the age of 14 when I entered my sophomore year at Woodlawn Senior High School in the West Baltimore suburbs. I was a young 10th grader anxiously looking for purpose and identity, and I wanted to fit into the high school scene and culture, and I wanted to make new friends, and I wasn't thinking too much about God at this point, but I did want to find a way to fit in, and I did want to find out who I really was.

I thought the best way to make new friends and join in to that high school scene would be to join a few sports teams, which I did, and it was there on that sports team that some of the girls on the varsity teams encouraged me to go on a Young Life weekend camp. Well, I had heard about these Young Life weekend camps, and I'd heard they were an awful lot of fun, and I heard that I would meet a lot of cute guys and meet a lot of new friends, so I was all excited about going. Sure enough, I had a wonderful time there on that Young Life weekend camp, but I was surprised in that it was there that camp God began to work in my heart in a deep and an unusual way.

I came to that weekend camp simply expecting nothing but fun and games, but as I sat on that camp meeting floor that Saturday evening looking up into the face of the camp speaker, God began to open my ears and open my heart in a way that I never dreamed imaginable. Because I heard the speaker share Christ's gospel, and for the first time I began to understand that God's gospel begins with his glory and his righteousness, beginning with the Ten Commandments, for instance. Gee, up until this point, I thought that all you need to do was keep those Ten Commandments, and in some way that would allow you access into heaven.

Follow those commandments and you'd work your way there, but the first time as I sat there on that floor, I measured my life up against those Ten Commandments and I saw how far I fell short of God's glory. For the first time it struck me that there was no way I could work my way to heaven because I could not attain God's standard of righteousness, which is perfection, and I knew I had enough sense to admit that I certainly wasn't perfect. Well, this was kind of confusing, and I remembered I got up from that camp meeting floor and pulled my sweater around me and walked out into the cool fall night air and I sat down on a rock and I looked up into the starry expanse above me and I reasoned to myself, well, my goodness, if I can't work my way to heaven, if God's not really up there before some chalkboard weighing my pros against my cons, if he's not keeping score, then who in the world is going to save me if I can't save myself? And that's when the pieces of the puzzle really began to fit together.

As I saw that I couldn't work my way to heaven and there was nobody in this world that could save me, but praise God, somebody out of this world, God himself, God became just like me. God in the flesh, Jesus Christ, he was the one who came to earth and lived the perfect life, met God's standard of righteousness, which is perfection, kept those Ten Commandments so that when he would die on that cross, because of his perfection, he could legally and justifiably die in my place. Christ on that cross was bearing the consequences of his own father's judgment against me.

And all I needed to do was believe it. When I say believe, I mean adhere to and rely on and trust in the fact that Jesus had done this for me personally. And the proof of it all was in his resurrection.

Well, everything was just whirling around in my heart and my mind and all these new thoughts and excitements just seemed to permeate my whole soul. And I bowed my head and in quiet excitement, and I just breathed a prayer that when something like God, for the first time, I see how sinful and wretched I really am in the light of your perfection. Yet God also for the first time, I see how wonderful your mercy is in that you provided a way for me to have a relationship with you.

Thank you, God, that you've done this for me and for so many. I right now proclaim that, yes, I know that you are inviting me to be into your family. And I take that step of faith.

Thank you, Jesus, for dying for my sins. And thank you for my new life that I'm going to have with your father, who now is my father. Gee, I bounded up from that rock so excited about my brand new life in Christ.

I went racing back to my counselor's cabin, a million things racing through my mind. And my counselor was pretty excited for me too. And as we sat on the edge of my bed that night, together, sharing and laughing and talking, she opened the scriptures to me.

Boy, as she leafed through those pages of scripture, the Bible became alive and active in my heart as never before. And of all the things she shared with me that night, I remember one verse in particular that really struck me. It was the book of John, the 10th chapter, the 10th verse where Jesus says that I have come that ye might have life and have it more abundantly.

Well, I didn't know much about the abundant Christian life, and I was only a brand new babe in Christ. And I was only 14 years old at the time, but I thought the abundant Christian life meant that now that I was a Christian, God was going to make me lose weight. And then I would get a new boyfriend.

And then God would bless me with peace and prosperity and prettiness and popularity. And I'd cruise through high school with great grades. And I'd go off to some neat East Coast college where I'd marry a neat guy who made \$35,000 a year and drove a Porsche.

And we live in a fashionable suburban home and send our kids off to little league and ballet lessons. And we collect Ethan Allen furniture and put an Eagle on our door. And I had it all figured out.

I'd grow old gracefully on some beautiful country farm and enjoy my grandchildren and the cows and the chickens and the horses. And then I died and I go to heaven. That's what I thought being a Christian was all about.

Truly. I was excited about the fact that I was heading for heaven, but the way on which I was about to get there, I thought it meant that God was supposed to shower me with material abundant blessings. I began

to think of God as some kind of a celestial bellboy or a spiritual vending machine.

And as that line of thinking took hold month after month, I unfortunately began to think that I had done God a great favor by accepting Jesus as my savior. My life began to revolve around me, myself, and I. Boy, I remember when I would have a quiet time in the early morning, I usually would judge the success of that quiet time by thinking to myself, when now did I get a really neat spiritual blessing out of this? Did God really teach me something? Did I get a really neat, super spiritual feeling? Me, myself, and I pride was a big problem. And although I had a boyfriend by this point, as I embarked on my junior year of high school, we were beginning to have bad moral problems.

And that caused a lot of guilt and hypocrisy in my life. And that kind of double standard began to eat away at the very foundation of my faith. And I began to have conflicts, not only with my boyfriend, but conflicts of jealousy and anger and resentment with my sisters.

Conflicts arose between my parents. My grades began to drop. I was becoming bored, lacking ambition.

By the time I reached my senior year in high school, things seemed so confusing and so frustrating. My life seemed so messed up. And I felt as though I had dug myself into such a mirey pit that I would never be able to get out of it.

I began to doubt the validity of the whole Christian faith. I began to question whether or not Jesus Christ really was all that he claimed to be, because for me, he just didn't seem to work. Again, that selfish line of thinking.

For me, you just don't seem to work, God. Pride was still my problem, even as I was ready to tube the whole Christian faith. Well, that was about my senior year in high school, 1967, three years after I had accepted Jesus as my savior.

But even at that point, God was not about to let me go. For I believe his Holy Spirit was even then working in my rebellious, stubborn, headstrong heart. And I believe that he prompted me to pray one last prayer to him.

That when something like, God, if you're there, and I guess you are, although I don't see you working in my life, but if you are there, God, and if you are listening, and if you're not too angry with me, please turn my life around. I've got enough sense left to know that I'm sure making a mess of things and I'm forging a path for myself that's headed for real destruction. So God, if you're there, and if you're listening, please turn my life around.

I prayed that prayer, not expecting God to take me very seriously. But now in retrospect, I believe the answer to the prayer came a month later on a very hot, humid July day. And the humidity was high enough in the Baltimore area so that my sister and I piled into our Volkswagen and we headed on down to the Chesapeake Bay to take a cool swim.

Everybody heads for the beaches when the humidity gets that high in the Chesapeake Bay area. And hot as we were, we just dove right into that water. And I swam out to this raft that was anchored pretty far offshore.

And seeing that the raft was so far offshore, I reasoned that the water must be very deep. So I didn't even bother to check it. And I went ahead and I took a reckless dive into what I thought was, of course, deep

water.

Well, as I felt my head crunch against the sandy bottom, in that same instant, I felt the crunch of my neck snap as my head was thrust back. And I severed my spinal cord and broke my neck at the fourth cervical level just in an instant. And in that instant, my life was to change for the rest of my life.

There was a man with a raft nearby and they laid me on that raft and pulled me up onto shore and called an ambulance and they whisked me off to the hospital where I stayed for about a year and a half. Now you thought I was frustrated and confused and bored in high school. Boy, in that hospital for a year and a half, the first year of which I didn't even get out of bed, I had a lot of time to think.

And my first thoughts were real bitterness and real anger. Because I just couldn't understand why a loving God would allow something like this to happen to me, especially the one who called herself a Christian. And this was God's idea of an answer to prayer.

Boy, how could he ever be trusted with another prayer again? I just could not understand what God was doing in my life and how this was an expression of his love or for that matter of his chastisement. Now I know I hadn't done things too swift when I was in high school and I know that that Christ was certainly not the Lord of my life, but is this the way that Jesus was going to start off chastising one of his children? Having to face the prospects of sitting down for the rest of my life without use of my hands or my legs? It just didn't make sense. And in my anger and in my bitterness, I remember laying a challenge toward God where I said in effect, okay God, enough, enough.

In this hospital bed, I'm going to prove that your son, Jesus Christ, really is who he claims to be and that he is the son of God and he did come to redeem mankind back unto himself or else I'm going to prove Jesus to be nothing but a nice man that lived 2,000 years ago and left us a good set of do's and don'ts to follow. Either he's true the son of God or he's just false, just some nice moral man because I was tired of what I thought were nothing but Pat Bible phrases and Sunday school stories. I wanted something that gave meaning to my life and purpose to my life.

I wanted my life to make sense and at that point nothing made sense. Well, I laid that challenge toward God and waited for him to answer and in the meantime, I searched through different religions and different philosophies. I read all kinds of existential authors, desperately looking for some kind of thread of purpose to my paralysis.

But you know as I laid there in that hospital bed, as I went through all those books and all those philosophies and all those other religions, nothing seemed to make sense except the fact that I was just lying there breathing and eating and sleeping and then everybody else in the whole human race was doing the same thing. Eating and breathing and sleeping. It's just that perhaps they were on their feet and they didn't realize it.

You know they were caught up with jobs and schools and responsibilities and homes and families and they didn't have time to think about the kinds of questions that were plaguing me. What is the meaning to life? Why am I here? Who is God? Does he care? Well, I wasn't on my feet and I wasn't bothered by job or school or home or family. I was just lying there eating and breathing and sleeping and you know what? I just couldn't believe that mankind was put here to eat and breathe and sleep.

There's got to be more to it all than just getting born and then growing old and then dying. There's got to be more to life than just menial existence or else life doesn't make sense. Yet in my heart of hearts I could not bring myself to believe that kind of despair and hopelessness.

There must be a personal God who personally cares about us if life is to have meaning at all. And that's when I began to listen a little bit more intently to these friends of mine from church and from young life who were coming into the hospital with their Bibles. Up until this point I wasn't very interested in hearing anything out of the Bible, but I think I began to melt under the power of their love and the pressure of their prayers because I began to listen.

And I remember one friend in particular opening up his Bible to 1 Thessalonians 5:18 where he said, in everything give thanks for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. And I said to my friend now wait a minute that is very easy for you to say in everything give thanks for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. I mean it's easy for you to say that because you're not the one laying around in a stupid hospital bed like some zombie waiting to die and you're going to be going out of here when visiting hours are over and you've got a football game to go to this weekend and parties and you're going back to college when semester break is over and I'm the one that's got to sit here in this hospital bed.

How am I supposed to give thanks for that? And secondly how can that possibly be the will of God? I mean isn't it God's will that I'm healed and happy and healthy and whole and perfect and nothing should ever go wrong? Well my friend stopped me and suggested that I really didn't understand what God's will was all about and why I could give thanks for God's will. I said if it means having to give thanks for this no one don't understand God's will. But he explained God's will in two real short simple verses if that is possible.

Romans chapter 8 the 28th and the 29th verse where it says there that all things fit together into a pattern for good to them that love God for the purpose of conforming you to the image of Jesus Christ and I questioned my friend you mean even paralysis fits together into a pattern for good? All things fit together into a pattern for good he answered my question. Well what kind of good was my next question? I mean I used to think of good in terms of the here and now you know dating and going to the right school and playing tennis and I used to think of good in terms of the here and now. And my friend said well maybe God is thinking of your good in the terms of the hereafter and what is ultimately best for the state of your soul and for the health of your character.

Maybe God's good is something far more eternally worthwhile than you've ever dreamed imaginable up until this point. And ever so slowly certainly not overnight but it began to dawn on me that all things really were fitting together to a pattern for good. I began to see that God was going to use this wheelchair to purge sin and all this bad habits out of my life.

God was going to get rid of the pride, get rid of the jealousy, get rid of the lust, get rid of the envy and the bad temper and the anger and the me myself and I and God in turn was going to cultivate in my life through the refining process of this wheelchair some Christ-like attributes like endurance and tolerance and steadfastness and patience and peace and perseverance and love and joy and kindness and meekness and gentleness. God was going to change me and he was going to use this wheelchair and that is why I could according to 1st Thessalonians 5:18 give thanks for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you that we become more like the one who has made us. Well all this sounded good in theory but you must remember that I was still frightened still confused and frustrated and very anxious and very

lonely but there finally came a point where I gritted my teeth and I gave thanks.

Now I wasn't very excited about giving thanks mind you because I wasn't very thankful or joyful about having to suffer but the Bible at that point was not telling me to conjure up some kind of an emotion about it all. The Bible was not even telling me to at that point be all jubilant or joyful the Bible was simply telling me to give thanks. So I laid aside the fears refused to listen to my emotions because my emotions at that point were going to wreak havoc with what little faith I was mustering up.

I put aside my feelings and I rested my faith not on those feelings not on those emotions or fears but on the word of God and I gritted my teeth and with a step of faith with my will empowered by God's spirit I gave thanks trusting that in the long run some way somehow this was all going to make sense. What mattered at that point was I obeyed the word of God and I give thanks and as the months wore on into a year and as I approached the time when I would be released from that hospital I continued in the obedience and the perseverance of giving thanks and you know what began to happen I began to see a change in my life ever so slowly not overnight but I began to see a change in my life.

I began to feel thankful when I saw that I could be a little bit more patient with all those nurses and their pills and I began to be even more thankful when I when I saw a change in my life at physical therapy I could endure a whole lot more and I wasn't so argumentative or irritated with those physical therapists putting me through all that flat on your back ballet I began to be thankful and I was surprised that all of a sudden I had this emotion of thankfulness it was almost as if God rewarded me for taking that step of faith with my will and giving thanks he rewarded me with the emotion of thankfulness and that is when my life really began to change as I began to see that boy what really counted in this life was not necessarily being on my feet or dating the right guy or driving the

right car going to the right school or wearing the right clothes or getting married or having kids or even sending them off anywhere but what really mattered in this life was to the degree that I would allow God to change me and even make me more like him the word of God began to become alive and active in my life as I searched through scripture looking for the examples of other men and women who really suffered examples like Job and Paul and Jesus himself the central figure of the Bible who suffered tremendously and I began to see a real thread of a ministry of suffering I began to see well for instance in the book of James in the New Testament James is writing to his brothers that are really getting persecuted and what does he tell them he says my brothers when all kinds of trials crowd

into your lives don't resent them as intruders but welcome them as friends realize they come to test your faith in producing you the quality of endurance let that process go on and you'll find that you'll become a man of mature character again that character of Jesus Christ and the right sort of independence I began to see that I really could welcome this trial as a friend because I could like Job understand that when he had finished trying me I would come forth as gold now that's amazing for Job to have said that isn't it I mean he had all kinds of questions for God as to why God was allowing his undeserved suffering and certainly it was undeserved at least from Job's point of view but you know Job began to see what godly wisdom was all about for Job at the end of his trial no longer

demand answers from God he just trusted God in the face of unanswered questions and I guess that's what godly wisdom is all about wisdom is not necessarily seeing things from God's point of view and figuring out the blueprint of your future or the tapestry of your life if you can do that at all it is a special insight and a wonderful blessing from God that he would give you that kind of understanding but I believe

true wisdom must be trusting God even when you can't figure him out even when you don't know the answers to your questions just trusting God simply because he is worthy of our trust Saint Peter reentered that same kind of theme in one of his epistles where he said that the refining and the maturing of our faith was far more precious than the refining of gold which is

perishable one day gold is going to perish but our faith matured and refined will never perish for it one day will result in praise and honor and glory to Jesus on the day of his revelation I began to see that my obedience and thanking God was a kind of investment for eternity that I could build for eternity by trusting God and in doing that my faith would be refined and matured Saint Paul there was another one who really suffered I mean he was shipwrecked and beaten and stone and cold and imprisoned and hungry and what does this dear apostle write in the fifth chapter of the book of Romans this same man that wrote all things fit together into a pattern for good to them that love God could in the fifth chapter write that he rejoiced in his suffering isn't that interesting he not only gave

thanks and he was not only thankful but he was so confident that he trusted a sovereign God who had everything working not only for his glory but for Paul's own good that he could say I rejoice in my suffering he goes on to say why I rejoice in my suffering knowing that suffering produces perseverance perseverance produces character again that character of Christ character produces hope and hope never ever disappoints us there would be times though where I would still be tempted to slip back into despair and depression where the darkness in my soul seemed as overwhelming as the darkness of those gray hospital walls but at times like that I used to hold on to the word of God as though it were some kind of anchor that was fixed fast in my soul and on Friday nights when all of my friends

would go home at visiting hours when visiting hours were over and when lights would have to be turned out 11 o'clock and you couldn't talk past 12 and here you were only 17 in a stupid old hospital bed wanting so much to be out with your friends enjoying yourself and having a good time I used to lie in that hospital bed and hold on to the word of God and I used to visualize Jesus standing next to my hospital bed and I didn't really see him there were no visions or anything like that I just used to imagine him standing there kind of dressed in a rough burlap cloak with a rope belt around his waist I looked into his face I saw kind piercing but yet merciful eyes rough hands and calloused feet with dusty dirty sandals I used to imagine him with one arm leaning against the guardrail to my

hospital bed I envisioned him with the other hand kind of leaning over me brushing back my hair and gently stroking my cheek reminding me of this I used to hear him say Johnny if I loved you enough to die for you while you yet hated me while you were yet a sinner then don't you think that kind of love is worthy of your trust even now and that makes sense doesn't it certainly that kind of love is worthy of our trust no matter what happens to us here on this earth God is worthy of our trust even in the face of unanswered questions because he proved his love so dramatically at Calvary we are heading for eternity and we are assured in Romans chapter 8 the 18th verse that our sufferings here on this earth are not even worthy to be compared with the joy that lays ahead the word of God began to

become alive and active in my heart I was released from that hospital on a beautiful April day in 1969 and I was to embark on some years of struggle some years of excitement some wonderful years of learning and of all the things that I've learned in this wheelchair nothing even begins to compare with the simple gospel message that I heard as a 14-year-old kid on that Young Life weekend camp for truly I've really seen that when Jesus was hanging on that cross he was in effect identifying himself with me and whenever I can't move and whenever I want so desperately to get out of this wheelchair that I could cry all I need to do is fix

my focus of my faith on the author and the beginner and the pioneer and the finisher of my faith Jesus who for the joy that was set before him endured the

cross paralyzed to that cross not being able to move from that cross certainly he knows and understands and empathizes with every hurt with every feeling that I struggle with and he knows and empathizes with your hurts and your handicaps and your frustrations and feelings because certainly I have to deal with severe paralysis or perhaps your handicap is of a different dimension mine is a broken neck but maybe yours is a broken heart or a broken home or a broken ego or maybe even something so small so minuscule as a broken arm or a broken fingernail maybe your life savings have been wiped away maybe you're too fat too thin maybe clairsill doesn't do a thing for your faith we all have handicaps of different dimensions different sizes different proportions and it hurts and I'm not here to

say that I can explain why God allows suffering unequivocally that is reserved for God and God alone God is not obligated to tell us the blueprint of our futures or the tapestry of our lives he's not obligated to answer any of our questions God simply wants us to exhibit that kind of Job-like wisdom that trusts him even in the face of unanswered questions.

Thank you, Johnny. This completes the first part of this presentation by Johnny Erickson on the joy of suffering. You've heard Johnny share the story of her tragic accident and how that God has since helped her to not only live with her suffering but to literally turn tragedy into triumph.

On the remaining portion of this tape, Johnny looks more closely at what she believes to be God's purposes in suffering. Johnny. It's very important for us as children of God to know that if we do gain any insight into our suffering or if God does in his grace and in his benevolence give us some answers to some questions then we must consider it a blessing and not a right to be assumed because God is God and we are to honor him as God and not demand that he explain himself.

So with that very important thought, I'd like to go on and share with you a little bit more about the other things that I've learned about being in this wheelchair. I think the most important thing that I've learned about being in this wheelchair is that God has allowed it for the purpose of making me more like Jesus. What I thought was the abundant Christian life, sports, cars, dating, fun and games and popularity and ease and comfort and wealth and health and affluence, what I thought the abundant Christian life really was, was not the abundant Christian life.

I believe the abundant Christian life is to the degree that we let God change us and make us more like him. And you know, it is that Christlike character ingrained and refined and matured in our character through our trials that is going to prove to this unbelieving world who Jesus Christ really is. Because we become partakers of Christ's nature in the midst of our own suffering, because we feed on his grace, because we are sustained by his strength, this unbelieving world will see something different about you and I, because they will see the supernatural way that we respond to our trials.

Can you imagine it? Suppose tomorrow your washing machine broke down and suppose your neighbor walked in on you and instead of her seeing you jumping up and down your box of oxydol, she saw you instead quietly and reverently just giving thanks to God. Oh my goodness, she'd want to know what makes you so different. Where do you get the power to pull off facing your trials with such victory? Trials, when we face them with a godly response and when we allow God to use those trials to change us and make us more like Jesus.

Boy, that will really prove to this unbelieving world how great God really is. So one purpose in suffering is that it makes us more like Jesus. And boy, that is what really makes a person attractive.

That is what really makes a person successful. True attractiveness, true success, true contentment does not necessarily depend on whether or not you buy the right clothes or go to the right college or hold down the right job or marry the right wife and raise the right kids and send them off to the right colleges. No, true abundant Christian living and true success and true happiness and contentment and true beauty come from that spirit of Jesus that just reflects and effervesces and emanates from your faith, from your life, from your character.

Another purpose in suffering? Well, I believe that suffering helps us to get to know God. You know, we're told that knowledge of God is a very important thing. The Presbyterian catechism states that man's chief aim is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

Jeremiah has told us, let not the rich man glory in his riches or the wise man glory in his wisdom or the mighty man glory in his might, but let he that glory glory in this, that he has come to know the Lord thy God. Even in the book of John, in the 17th chapter, we are told that eternal life is what? Knowledge of God. I often say that, gee, what will count on the judgment day will not be necessarily whether or not we've written books or whether or not we've traveled to different conferences or whether or not we've stood before thousands and witnessed regularly of our faith, but what is really going to count when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ is our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Have we come to know him on this earth? Has our walk been one with him? Suffering helps us to get to know God. When I was in the hospital, I came to know a young girl who was a tremendous encouragement to me in this regard because her life was a life of a desire to get to know God. She was my roommate at Green Oaks Hospital there in Maryland.

She was a young black girl, about 17 years old, who was very pretty, very popular in her high school. She was a cheerleader at Western High School and just a girl with a lot of love, a lot of effervescence, a lot of excitement and zest for living. She, during cheerleader practice one day, noticed that she was stumbling quite a lot.

The next morning she woke up and went off to school and she continued to trip and even fell during one of her classes. She went to the nurse's office and the nurse sent her home. She went to bed early that night.

When she woke up the next morning, she found that her legs were paralyzed. Well, of course, this alarmed her parents greatly and they called the doctor and they rushed her off to the hospital, but within a few short weeks, not only was she totally paralyzed without use of her legs or her arms, but she was also totally blind. Denise Williams suffered an unusual and a very acute attack of multiple sclerosis, which had left her at the age of 17 blind and paralyzed.

And here was this young girl, one of my roommates, and when I entered Green Oaks Hospital, she had already been there for a year, lying in that bed, blind and paralyzed. And Denise's friends, after a while, because she had been in that hospital for such a long time and even after I had been there for a year, she had already been there two years, her friends stopped coming around. Most of them got married or went off to college or got involved in other responsibilities or other commitments.

Her parents had to work regularly, so they couldn't come to the hospital to visit her as frequently as did my family. But yet there was something unusual about Denise. She never complained.

And her life there was, I believe, a good example of Acts chapter 1, verse 8, where Jesus says, She really was being a witness. Her life was a witness. She never complained.

She trusted God. She couldn't even fill up her time with reading or watching television or talking to many people because she was so weak. She just laid there in that bed being a witness.

And she came to know God very, very intimately. And you know, looking back on Denise's life, seeing how great of an encouragement she was to me when I was there in that hospital bed all those months, I could see now that her life was really nothing but a sweet smelling savor to God and really God alone. Because it wasn't as if Denise Williams would ever get out of that hospital.

She would never travel. She would never write a book. She'd never be on any television program.

She would probably never get a chance to speak to many people about the Lord, except maybe one or two handful. But yet her life was a sweet smelling savor to God and God alone. And rich will her reward be in heaven because she had come to know him.

Her reward will be great because she learned what Jeremiah exhorted us to do. Let not the rich man glory in his riches, or the wise man glory in his wisdom, or the mighty man glory in his might, but that he that glory, glory in the fact that he has come to know God. Denise's blessing, Denise's glory will be that when she stands before the judgment seat of Christ, her reward will be great because she has come to know God.

That's what suffering does. It helps you to get to know God. Because what better way is there to get to know God than depend upon him? And what better way to depend upon him than when you have to depend upon him? And you know when you have to depend upon him in the midst of adversity, you get to know, feel, touch, taste God's sustaining grace in such a way that you never dreamed imaginable when you languished around in your bed of roses.

God's grace and knowledge of God, Christ's presence himself becomes a concrete reality to where you almost feel as though you could reach out and touch the hem of his garment because his presence is so close to you, sustaining you through your tears, calming you in the midst of your frustration, supporting you in your anxiety and in your pain. Suffering helps us to get to know God and that is our crowning glory. That is what will constitute our rich reward in heaven.

How much have we come to know God? Not just know about God or not just get involved with God's work, but know God. That's what suffering does. Another purpose of suffering? Colossians chapter 3 says that we should set not our affection on the passing things of this earth, but we should set our affection on heavenly glories above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

Suffering helps you to get your eyes off the passing things of this earth and onto heavenly glories above. Let me tell you, when I was on my feet, I never thought much about heavenly glories above. For one thing, I was far too interested in the passing things of this earth.

They seemed far too appealing and far too exciting and I never really wanted to think much about heaven at the age of 17. Maybe one reason I didn't want to think much about heaven is because at that time I

thought it was only approachable through death and when you're 17 you don't want to think too much about death and I really didn't know much about the constitution of heaven. I mean, I thought that, gee, I'd get up there and don an angel costume and I'd smooth down my feathered wings and I'd prop my feet up on the cloud and I'd polish gold all day long and who wants to sit around and fix chuck holes in the streets of gold all day long? I don't.

I thought heaven was a tremendously boring place to be and I wasn't very excited about playing hearts, so I never really thought much about heaven. I was far too interested in the passing things of this earth, but suffering has a way of really fixing our focus on our blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, because therein really does lie your hope. Therein lies your assurance that one day God will show you that bottle in which he has bottled all your tears and all the tears and the pain will be wiped away and this perishable really will put on the imperishable and this corruptible really will put on their corruption.

In corruption, God is going to give us new glorified bodies one day. We'll be redeemed totally, not just spiritually and emotionally, but physically. We'll have a new physical body and I tell you, I can't wait.

I just can't wait for that day when I can embrace people who now mean so much to me here on this earth, but yet I've never touched. I can't wait for the day, well let me explain it this way. I've read in the scriptures where I am told that lions will lay down with lambs in heaven.

Well I figure if there's lions and lambs in heaven there's got to be horses, so I can't wait for the day I'm going to ride again. And I can't wait for that day when with new glorified hands I really get the opportunity to stand up before all the hierarchy of heaven and hell and demons and men and powers and principalities and all the heavenly hosts and shout out to all the universe and anybody that's within earshot that Jesus is Lord and he is the one who sustained me in all those days when I was in that wheelchair. I met a young man a couple years ago who really gave me a firm taste of what heaven is really going to be all about.

A young man by the name of Rick Spalding. Many people write to me and Rick was one of the many young guys who have written to me and I noticed something different about Rick's letters. I could tell he had some kind of a handicap but I really wasn't sure what kind of a handicap it was from his letters.

He never really explained himself very fully, but I knew he didn't live too far from me in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. So when I went up to the Philadelphia area to celebrate the bicentennial in 1976, we decided that we drop in on the Spalding family and pay Rick a visit. Well, we called the Spaldings and let them know that we were on our way and were most anxious to meet Rick and spend some time with him and as we pulled up into the driveway and I got out of the car and into my wheelchair and wheeled up to the door, his mom came out to greet us and she hesitated a moment and said, well, I think you better be prepared to meet Rick.

You see, he's very, very paralyzed and I don't want you to be taken aback at the severity of his injury. It seems that Rick at the age of 15 had been in a fist fight with some kids and was knocked the gymnasium floor and lost all motor control and could do nothing but just breathe and that was about it. We went into his room and there he was kind of humped up on a chaise lounge and I have to admit, I guess I was taken aback when I first saw him because this guy could not even move his head.

He couldn't move his hands. He couldn't smile. He couldn't move his legs.

He couldn't move anything and the most that he could do to communicate with those around him was simply blink his eyes. Can you imagine being that paralyzed to the point that all you could do to communicate with your loved ones was simply blink your eyes? Well, this young man not only communicated effectively with his eyes, but he went on to finish his high school education and he accumulated a 3.0 average in college. He had finished up his junior year by the time that I had met him and it was amazing how this guy did that.

He listened to all of his textbooks on tape and then when he had to write his term papers, his mom devised an alphabet that was there above his pillow on the ceiling and she would watch his eyes and she was able to discern which letter of the alphabet he would look at and she would write that letter down. Then he'd look at another letter and she'd write that letter down. He'd look at another letter, she'd write that letter down.

Can you imagine the patience of this woman even to write her son's term papers? He was adopted by the way also and the commitment that I saw from his parents was truly an inspiration to me. But he accumulated a 3.0 average, blinking his eyes. And as we began to communicate, because we really couldn't converse or talk, the most I could do was ask him questions and he would answer me yes or no by blinking his eyes.

But in the course of our so-called conversation, I began to see that he had a buoyant and optimistic faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus was the author and the finisher of his faith and he had his faith fixed on Jesus at all points in his life. And of all the things that we talked about that day, all the different portions of scripture and all the sharings and the goings-on of his life in Christ, we got to the part where we started talking about heavenly glories above.

And when I talked to him and asked him whether or not he was excited about getting his new body, let me tell you, he got so excited he started blinking his eyes up and down and up and down. Remind you, he couldn't smile. He had a stiff, solemn expression on his face yet his eyes just danced with joy as they just fluttered up and down and up and down, expressing the excitement and the expectancy that was just welling up within his heart, looking forward to that day when he would go to be with the Lord Jesus Christ.

That's what suffering does. It fixes your focus on heavenly glories above. It increases and refines your faith so that you begin to see that your faith really is the substance of what you hope for.

And it is the evidence of those things which you yet cannot see. Rick's faith was the substance of what he hoped for, the divine, unseen realities that yet laid ahead for him. And it was truly the evidence of what he could not see, the divine, unseen realities that work at present in his life, fitting together for good to make him more like Jesus Christ, accumulating for him a rich reward in heaven.

Faith, the kind of faith that is refined and matured by suffering, does that. And that kind of faith almost becomes a substitute for sight and possession. That kind of faith so puts you in contact with the unseen world that you really begin to feel that you're conversing with and living among things unseen already.

That kind of matured faith makes the distant and the far away seem very near and very real. It removes all intervening time and annihilates all interposing space. And that kind of faith almost seems to transport your soul at once, right now, into heavenly glories above, so that you feel as though the hereafter is really here already.

And I'm sure that's why men of great faith who suffered greatly in the New Testament always spoke of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ as being at hand. They felt as though the hereafter were really here already, because their passions were so consumed with heavenly glories above. They really felt as though they were conversing with things unseen.

They really felt as though their conversation were in heaven. They really felt as though they were already abiding with Christ in the heavenly realm. They really felt as though they were already seated with him at the right hand of God.

And they really felt as though that he had already come before Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and unto an innumerable company of angels, and to the church of the firstborn, and to God the judge. They felt as though heaven were here already. Such is the power of faith, refined faith, matured faith, that is perfected through suffering.

It throws back into the far distance all the things that men of this earth call near and real. And that kind of refined faith brings forward into vital contact with the soul the things which men call invisible and distant. That kind of faith helps us to realize our true positions here on this earth as sojourners, and aliens, and pilgrims.

And we begin to see that heaven is our passion, because that is where Jesus is, and we long to be with him. Suffering does that. It prepares us to meet Jesus Christ.

And you know, I can't imagine standing before the Lord Jesus Christ on the day of his coronation as King of kings and Lord of lords. I can't imagine standing before this one who suffered so much on my behalf, this one who was flogged, and beaten, and spit upon, crucified on my behalf. I can't imagine standing before this suffering, yet victorious savior, never having suffered myself.

Because how would I really be able to express heartfelt thanks and deep-seated gratitude for all that he had suffered on my behalf if I had never suffered myself? How would I really begin to know or understand what he went through on my behalf if I never tasted the pain of the crucified life? Suffering prepares us to meet the Lord. And may we never ever forget that we Christians have as our head one who wore a crown of thorns. We in the body of Christ seem to be so bent on believing that the Christian's experience, the Christian's walk here on this earth, should be one of sheer ecstasy spiced with intermittent joy.

It is given to us to not only believe on him, but to suffer for his sake. Denise died about three years ago, and Rick Spalding died just last year. And I want to close with a song that really, every time I hear it, every time I sing it, I just get so excited about one day going and unrolling my sleeping bag in my mansion.

I just get so excited about that day when I will stand before the judgment seat of Christ and with that new glorified body embrace all those who have meant so much to me here on this earth. I just praise God that suffering is part of the Christian's life. I just thank him so much that he is a wise God that knows what's best for us.

That he has allowed us the privilege of suffering so that we might be identified with Jesus Christ and that we might learn to lean and rely upon his grace. And I want to share this song with you as an expression of that joy. Like me, I once was lost, but now I am found, but now I see.

When we've been there ten trillion young years, bright shining as the sun, we've lost days to sing God's praise. Then when we first begun, unamazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I

once was lost, but now I am found.

I really was blind, but now I see. Amen.

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Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/19/SID19872.mp3>

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