



**PREPARATION FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM
(LOOKING BACK AND GROWING
FORWARD)
STUDIES IN THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY
LESSON 7**

**THE PURPOSE OF TRIALS AND SUFFERING
Deuteronomy 8:2-18; 29:5-6**

Deut 8:2 "And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no."

Deut 8:3 "And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live." (Cf. Jesus' use of these verses against Satan - Matt. 4:4 cf. Luke 4:4).

Deut 8:5 "Thou shalt also consider in thine heart, that, as a man chasteneth his son, so the LORD thy God chasteneth thee."

Deut 8:16-18 "Who fed thee in the wilderness with manna, which thy fathers knew not, that he might humble thee, and that he might prove thee, to do thee good at thy latter end; and thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth. But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he sware unto thy fathers, as it is this day."

Deut 29:5-6 "And I have led you forty years in the wilderness: your clothes are not waxen old upon you, and thy shoe is not waxen old upon thy foot. Ye have not eaten bread, neither have ye drunk wine or strong drink: that ye might know that I am the LORD your God." ("I am the LORD": -- Ezekiel uses this phrase over 50 times to reveal the judgment and mercies of the Lord to Israel in exile.)

God specifically claims that He allowed Israel's trials both as punishment and education. He wanted them to learn to trust Him totally. They were never to think that they were capable by themselves.

The saying "Man does not live by bread alone" (8:3) is firmly established in the English language, but the meaning which those who quote it wish to convey is not at all what the text itself expresses. Popularly interpreted, the quotation only expresses the first part of the sentence. It has come to mean: *human beings are not fulfilled by material things alone; there is another, spiritual dimension of life which makes it truly worthwhile*. But the full text hardly allows for this interpretation, though what it precisely means may still be open to interpretation.

There is no question about the broader meaning of the text: *"God taught you in the wilderness that He could meet your needs by whatever means He chose. He gave you manna to show you that you would be sustained through His providence, whether you had bread or not. That time He sent manna, another time He could choose to care for you in a different way."*

Such is the general meaning of the statement; it fits the context which relates God's desire to educate His people in a true understanding of their own limitations on the one hand and His limitless power on the other.

But there is another dimension to the text. Literally, the second half of the verse says that man lives "by any product of God's mouth." It might be translated "anything that the Lord decrees," that is, God's word and will are

the cause of every material thing, just as the world itself came into being by His word. The process of creation was dependent on God's word (Gen. 1), and so is Israel, whom He has fashioned.

In stating that God tried Israel by hardships in the wilderness (8:2-3) Moses gives an important principle of faith. When Israel suffered, he says, it suffered because God in His very love of Israel so willed it. The Psalmist put it this way: "Happy is the man whom You discipline, O Lord... to give him tranquillity in times of misfortune" (Psalm 94:12-13); "It was good for me that I was humbled, so that I might learn Your laws" (119:71).

"By chastisements of love" (In Hebrew, *yisurin shel ahavah*, as tradition came to call them), a loving Father educates and purifies His children. In doing so, He too may be said to experience suffering, to weep over the bitter effects of the afflictions He Himself has brought about; nonetheless He must do what divine necessity demands.

This view allowed for the protests of a Job who questioned the justice of God, but who in the end surrendered to the superior wisdom of the One before Whom he stood in awe though he could not fathom His design. However it demands an unfaltering trust in the One Who created, sustains and leads us. He must be trusted as the "blessed controller of all things" (1 Timothy 6:15).

Scripture actually gives 8 reasons for our trials and suffering as human beings, but we must first note some self evident and *a priori* principles.

I. THREE BASIC BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES ABOUT TRIALS

A. Suffering is real.

Some religions believe that suffering is just illusion. But the pain, grief, and sorrow that we experience in this life are not imaginary. They are real. We cannot talk about suffering in some detached theological manner. Anguish, distress, torment and agony cannot be reasoned away by some appeal to a few Scriptures taken out of context. Suffering was so real that our Lord Himself came to live in it, experience the full depth of it, conquer it, and redeem it. His suffering was real. So is ours.

B. Suffering came into the world as a result of the fall of man.

Death, pain, grief, loneliness, and all other types of suffering were not part of God's original world (Genesis 1:31; 3:17-19; 5:29; Romans 5:12,14,18; 8:20-22; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22; Revelation 21:3-4). Hence, God is not the author for all the bad things that happen in the world. It is not fair, nor helpful to blame Him for the origin of our pain. Adam and all sinful human beings that prove themselves to be children of Adam are the ones to blame for the curse that the world is under.

C. Suffering is real, but it is not the only reality.

There is more to the universe than pain. God is in charge and nothing happens apart from His involvement at some level (Deuteronomy 32:39; 1 Samuel 2:6-9; 1 Chronicles 29:11-12; Proverbs 16:4; Job 2:9-10; Ecclesiastes 9:1; Isaiah 45:7; Jeremiah 18:1-23; Lamentations 3:37-38; Daniel 2:20-21; 4:17,25,35; Matthew 10:29; Luke 1:53; Acts 1:7; 17:24-26,28; Ephesians 1:4-5; Colossians 1:17; Revelation 4:11). God has co-opted the suffering of this world for His own purposes. The King of the entire universe uses trials and times of suffering for His own ends. God is in control and sovereign over all events.

II. CAN WE KNOW GOD'S PURPOSES FOR SUFFERING?

A. Not Always

Sometimes God reveals His purposes to us immediately. Sometimes it is not until years later that we can look back and see some good come from misery. And sometimes our pain remains a complete mystery to us. There is some pain that we will not understand until we see Him face to face and understand everything completely (1 Corinthians 13:12). If we cannot specifically identify the purpose for our pain, we will find ourselves in good company. Job and many other brethren did not know either. Yet we can get a glimpse behind their pain and see that the Lord was there. He had a purpose and was working rationally in all their

lives, even though they did not understand. And in this we should find much encouragement. When we do not understand why we are suffering, we experience a doubly difficult burden. Ultimately, we must trust in the God who loves us and has promised that "...in all things God is working for the good for those who love Him" (Romans 8:28).

Our trust is in a Person, not in formulas, principles and explanations. When we are ignorant of the reasons for our pain, we must place our confidence in a God who has demonstrated throughout history that He is wise and loving in all that He does.

B. Sometimes

Absolutely! Spiritually speaking, it should be enough for us to simply trust our Creator, but the Lord knows our human weakness and infirmity. So in the Scriptures God reveals to His children several possible explanations for their trials, pain and hardships. The God we love is a reasonable and purposeful God and He has demonstrated His love for us by revealing to us reasons for our pain. If we are going through a trial today it may help you to know that there is an explanation for our suffering. Sometimes we may be able to specifically identify in Scripture the purpose for our pain.

There is rationality to adversity, because God is a rational God. He has not abandoned us. He is working. God is not obligated to tell us why He does what He does. But by His grace God has revealed to us in the Scriptures the way He works in the lives of His saints. He does this so that we might have greater confidence in Him. Our Lord said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). And Peter said, "Cast all your cares upon Him, because He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). Two thousand years later we can still trust these words.

III. Some Trials Are For Our Own Benefit

A. Trials as Consequence (sowing and reaping)

Much of our suffering is a result of the spiritual, moral and natural consequences of our own actions and choices. Many things get blamed on God, which simply are not His fault. If you jump off a ten-story building and kill yourself, you can't blame that on God. The law of gravity is the same for everyone. If you violate the natural laws of the universe, then you pay the consequences.

Just as there are natural laws in the universe, so there are moral and spiritual laws. These laws are the same for everyone. If you violate them you will suffer the consequences of your actions. That is not God's fault, it is yours.

God often allows His children to experience the natural consequences of their actions. The results are painful, but God is not obligated to deliver us from our wrong choices. Taking responsibility for our actions instead of blaming God is a step toward maturity.

Here are some passages for you to read which illustrate the principle of consequential suffering:

1. Galatians 6:7-10 -- The creation principle of sowing and reaping stated by Paul.

2. Numbers 14:41-45 -- God said to the Israelites, "Do not go. I won't go with you." Israel said, "We'll go anyway." They experienced the natural consequence of their action.

3. Deuteronomy 28-30 -- In these chapters God sets before the Israelites a moral choice. If they love and follow God, He will prosper and protect them. If they abandon King God, then He will no longer be their protector and they will suffer all the consequences of life without God as their king.

4. 2 Samuel 11:1-5 -- David's adultery results in an unplanned pregnancy, which brings much suffering to himself, his family, and his nation.

5. 1 Kings 11:1-5 -- Solomon ignored God's warning of intermarriage with unbelievers. This introduced the nation to idolatry and division. Solomon himself lost fellowship with God until near the end of his life.

6. Acts 20:7-12 -- Eutychus' death is a result of natural consequences. Of course, the amazing thing is that God in His mercy sometimes delivers us from even the hurtful consequences of our actions. That is grace. That is undeserved mercy.

B. Trials as Correction

This type of suffering is a little different than the law of sowing and reaping. The suffering we experience here is not a natural consequence of our sin. This is suffering brought into our life by God to stop a pattern of sin before we experience natural consequences. God sees a specific sin or habit pattern which needs correcting in our life and says, "I had better administer some correction before this thing really gets out of hand." This is called God's discipline or correction.

The mother who spans her child to stop him from running into the street is administering correctional suffering. She administers discipline so that the child will change his actions and not experience the natural consequence of those bad actions.

God disciplines us out of love in the same manner. Of course, we experience this discipline as suffering. God sees it as short-term pain for long term gain. Here are some examples for you to read about:

1. Psalm 32 -- God ordained illness (v.4) as a result of a specific sin in David's life.

2. James 5:14-16 -- A Christian brother experiencing illness as a result of an unconfessed and undealt with sin in his life.

3. 1 Corinthians 11:29,30 -- Weakness, sickness, death as a result of improper participation in the Lord's supper.

4. Acts 5:1-11 -- An example of God's discipline and correction in the early church, so that the rest of the church would not lie to the Holy Spirit.

5. 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 -- In this case, the church is disciplining the individual in place of God. Suffering is being imposed so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.

C. Trials as Education

Educational suffering is not a consequence of an immediate sin. Educational suffering is a challenge (we call it a 'trial') that God brings into our life to help us develop and grow. Educational suffering is meant to bring spiritual fruit and positive character traits into our life.

God often puts us in situations that initially seem to be beyond us. "Why should I have to go through this? I did not do anything to deserve this in my life. This doesn't seem fair, God." God puts us in these situations to help us become mature. Educational suffering is a little like military bootcamp. It gets us in shape and makes us a warrior for God.

Read the following Scripture passages. You will find a key word repeated in each of these passages. It is the word "teach" or "learn."

1. Deuteronomy 8:3 -- Why did Israel have to go through the wilderness? To teach Israel that man must live by God's words as well as bread.

2. Hebrews 12:5-11 -- God places us in suffering situations that we might share in His holiness (v.10) and righteousness, and peace (v.11).

3. **Hebrews 5:7-10** -- Jesus Himself had to "learn" obedience through the things He suffered.

4. **Hebrews 2:10** -- Jesus was "made perfect" or "became mature" through suffering.

5. **2 Corinthians 12:1-10** -- Preventive suffering so that Paul would learn humility and rely on the Lord's power.

What are some positive traits that times of trial can develop in us? Here are some of the positive traits that God wants to build in us through trials:

- ❖ Endurance -- Romans 5:3
- ❖ Character -- Romans 5:4
- ❖ Hope -- Romans 5:4
- ❖ Knowledge of God's love -- Romans 5:5
- ❖ Empathy -- 2 Corinthians 1:3,4
- ❖ Obedience -- Hebrews 5:8
- ❖ Maturity -- James 1:4
- ❖ Proven faith -- 1 Peter 1:7

D. Trials as Evaluation

God uses trials to test us, to show us the level we have attained, and to open our eyes to areas we still need to work on. These trials are often given for the specific purpose of testing our faith. Do we really trust God or do we just say we trust God? Evaluational trials tell us the answer to that question. Read these Scriptures. The key word in these passages is "test."

1. **Genesis 22:1-18** -- God tested Abraham. Note the following pattern: Test . . . Verdict . . . Blessing.

2. **Deuteronomy 8:2** -- Israel tested during the 40 years in the wilderness to know what was in their heart.

3. **Luke 4:1-14** -- The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tested.

4. **1 Peter 1:6-7** -- Peter said that the purpose of the trials this church was facing was to test their faith. E. Stanley Jones once said, *"I was talking to a bishop who had retired. He was frustrated. When he was no longer in the limelight of the bishopric, he was frustrated and told me so. He wanted to know the secret of victorious living. I told him it was in self-surrender. The difference was in giving up the innermost self to Jesus. The difference was in the texture of the things that held him. When the outer strands were broken by retirement, the inner strands were not enough to hold him. Apparently he had a case of 'limelight-itis' instead of a case of surrender to Jesus. Fortunately, with me, surrender to Jesus was the primary thing, and when the outer strands were cut by this stroke, my life did not shake. I need no outer props to hold my faith, for my faith holds me."* -- E. Stanley Jones, Methodist missionary to India after a stroke that left him immobile and virtually speechless.

IV. Some Trials Are For the Benefit of Others

A. Trials as Sacrifice

Some suffering is for the sake of someone else. The first four reasons for trials and suffering were for our own benefit. But not all difficulty is for us. The next four explanations for suffering are for the benefit of others. Sacrificial suffering should not be too difficult for us to understand since examples of sacrificial suffering abound in the natural world: the mother who suffers to bring a baby into the world; the parent who sacrifices to raise a child; the living donor who gives up his kidney for a transplant recipient, etc.

Numerous examples of sacrificial suffering can be found in the Bible too:

1. **Genesis 45:4-7** -- Joseph suffered loneliness, slavery, and jail in order to deliver the family of Israel from death.
2. **Isaiah 53** -- Jesus suffered for our benefit (vs. 5,6,8,10,12).
3. **Romans 16:3** -- Priscilla and Aquila suffered for Paul.
4. **1 Samuel 20:1-33** -- Jonathan suffered for David.
5. **Romans 14:13-21; 15:1-3** -- Stronger brother suffered for the weaker.

B. Trials as Revelation

God causes a situation of suffering so that He might reveal Himself or glorify Himself to others.

1. **Hosea 1-3** -- Hosea was commanded to do something which God knew would involve suffering for him. Hosea was commanded to marry a woman that God knew would be unfaithful to Hosea. Why did God ask Hosea to suffer with an unfaithful spouse? In order that God could reveal Himself to the adulterous nation that He loved. Hosea's marriage to unfaithful Gomer was like God's marriage to unfaithful Israel.
2. **John 9:1-3** -- This man was born blind so that God could glorify Himself through his healing. His suffering was an opportunity for God to reveal His mercy, power and love.
3. **Romans 3:25,26** -- God made Jesus to suffer in order that His divine justice might be revealed.
4. **Romans 5:8** -- Christ's suffering on the cross demonstrated and revealed God's love to us.

C. Trials as Persecution

As we share the good news we suffer at the hands of some who reject it:

1. **Jeremiah 20:7-10,14-18** -- The ministry God had given to Jeremiah resulted in persecution and suffering.
2. **Matthew 5:10-12** -- Suffering will come to us as a result of sharing the gospel.
3. **1 Peter 3:14-17** -- We will suffer for doing good in an evil world.
4. **Hebrews 11:35b-39** -- All of these people suffered persecution for their faith and never saw their reward in this life.

D. Trials as Invisible Warfare

We suffer as a result of heavenly battles about which we know nothing:

1. **Job 1 & 2** -- Job never knew that the reason he suffered was because of a heavenly contest between God and Satan. Does that make Job just a pawn in God's chess game? No. We have no concern for pawns after they have served their purpose. But God does care for Job. That is why there are chapters 38-42 in the book of Job.

2. Luke 22:31,32 -- On the human level Peter's denial of Jesus is a lack of faith. But here we get a glimpse of a heavenly battle going on as well. Peter will be sifted by Satan. Jesus is also a participant in this heavenly battle. He prays that Peter's faith would not completely fail.

3. Ephesians 6:12 -- There is an invisible realm of conflict about which we know little and yet we are intimately involved in the struggle. This struggle causes suffering for us and yet is largely beyond our ability to comprehend.

"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time...

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"

(Rom 8:18-22; 28-32 NIV)