

J. I. Packer on the Surprise Blessing of Trials

MARCH 28, 2022 JEREMY LINNEMAN

I remember where I was when I read these words by the late theologian J. I. Packer: “A certain type of ministry of the gospel is *cruel*. It doesn’t mean to be, but it is.”

What is the cruel sort of ministry Packer had in mind? His answer would haunt me.

I was going through a particularly hard season of depression and had been suffering from chronic illness. It was a season of trial and discouragement that had lasted far too long—or so I thought. I’d prayed. I’d talked with wise counselors. I’d prayed more. But this difficult season was unrelenting, and my spirit wasn’t lifting.

That very night, my whole mindset toward pain and suffering began to change.

Then my friend recommended Packer’s *Knowing God*. I’d read it before, but he pointed me to a chapter late in the book called “These Inward Trials.” I reopened the classic, found the chapter, and began to read. That very night, my whole mindset toward pain and suffering began to change. (Some lessons can’t be learned until we’re ready.)

Packer’s reflections on the cruel teaching and its wonderful antidote helped me make sense of my season of hardship.

These Inward Trials

So, what is this *cruel* sort of gospel ministry? According to Packer, the cruel teaching is that becoming a Christian makes your life easier. It’s the idea that being a believer decreases your sinning, enables you to find your truest self and deepest calling, equips you to change the world, and means less overall suffering. We could summarize this unbiblical teaching as: Your Best Life Now!

The lopsided impression “which pictures the normal Christian life as trouble-free,” Packer writes, “is bound to lead sooner or later to bitter disillusionment.”

If there's a phrase that encapsulates the spiritual condition of 20- and 30-somethings I've ministered among for the past decade and a half, it's *bitter disillusionment*.

In the words of *Fight Club's* Tyler Durden, we've been lied to our entire lives. I'm thinking mostly of us millennials and Gen Zers raised in middle-class America: we were raised on a steady diet of self-esteem; we've been graded on a generous curve; we've been told if we pursue our dreams, anything is possible. "You are going to change the world." And then we become adults and discover life is hard, we're not all that special, and this world is a vicious place.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this the "wish-dream." He wrote *Life Together* in German, and for lack of a better word, his original English translators came up with the phrase "wish-dream." The wish-dream is the ideal of life as we think it should be, a life of happiness, meaning, and satisfaction. It's a life without pain, without setbacks, without conflict, without suffering.

We lay this wish-dream of the Christian life on others, unable to understand why they're struggling in their spiritual lives. When we do face hardship, we're shocked—we seek to blame others, make demands of God, or "spin" why it's not so bad. A failed wish-dream is the breeding ground for self-pity. Our Christian communities can be broken down by the wish-dream, as we become disillusioned when it doesn't come true in our friendships and church growth.

God's grace speedily shatters our wish-dream so he might rebuild us around reality. In his grace (and it is sheer grace), God enables us to embrace the way of Jesus in a broken world.

Indeed, it's cruel ministry to call believers back to their wish-dream and suggest that Jesus and the church will make it all possible after all. Christ does change everything, but it's certainly not simple.

Packer continues:

God doesn't make our circumstances notably easier [when we become Christians]; rather the reverse. Dissatisfaction recurs over wife, or husband, or parents, or in-laws, or children, or colleagues or neighbors. Temptations and bad habits which their conversion experience seemed to have banished for good reappear.

Thankfully, Scripture don't leave us on our own when it comes to facing suffering.

Crucifying the Wish-Dream

Ecclesiastes, the Old Testament book that crucifies the wish-dream, says God “has set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end” ([Eccles. 3:11](#), NIV).

Deep within us, a good and perfect life exists; yet we can't understand what God is doing in actual history.

As Tim Keller has shown in *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, suffering is one of the main themes of the Bible. Genesis begins with an account of how evil and death came into the world. Exodus describes Israel's oppression in Egypt and their 40 years in the wilderness, a time of trial and testing. The Psalms provide prayers for every situation in life, but the most frequent prayers are for help in need and comfort in suffering; its honest prayers describe the brutality of life and the injustice of suffering. Three Old Testament books—Job, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes—have suffering as their main theme. Two New Testament books—Hebrews and 1 Peter—focus on helping Christians face suffering, sorrows, and troubles. Most of all, the central Person of the Scriptures, Jesus Christ, is called the Man of Sorrows.

Suffering is a significant theme of the Scriptures, and it gives us a comprehensive view of pain and hardship. It's not just a couple of quick platitudes we can use to comfort each other at funerals. The Bible doesn't give us only happy endings; it's not a 22-minute TV episode with a full resolution before the end credits.

It's important to know what God has promised and what he hasn't. We're living in a broken world. God hasn't promised freedom from suffering in this life.

Keller uses the fiery furnace of [Daniel 3](#) as an illustration for how God uses suffering in our lives. Fire, of course, is a dangerous thing; it can be all-consuming, it can burn down a building, it can clear out an entire forest, and it can kill a person within moments.

But fire, when used in a controlled and wise way, is one of the great gifts of life. Fire can warm a home in the winter, refine a piece of metal, shape clay; it can be used to cook food—without fire there would be no barbecue. Fire, used rightly, doesn't burn; it *shapes, refines, prepares, purifies, and beautifies*. Fire *matures* things.

Suffering, in the same way, is absolutely painful. It feels like death; we can hardly bear it. And yet if faced with faith and endured in the presence of God, suffering *shapes us, refines us, prepares us, purifies us, beautifies us*. Suffering matures people.

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In the gospel, suffering takes evil and pain and turns it back on itself; through suffering we *overcome* evil and pain. Out of darkness comes light, and out of death comes new life.

In my own life story, I've suffered the loss of two of my three siblings. I developed insomnia, depression, and chronic pain after my brother's death, and despite years of prayer and counseling, many of those symptoms remain locked in my body. God has brought profound healing and peace, but the scars still remain.

So, to go back to Packer: What is the purpose of these trials? Why have we been suffering through COVID for so long? And how do I bring my hurt—and my crucified wish-dream—before the Father?

Purpose of These Trials

Packer puts it like this: A good father doesn't let his children go their own way—even when it's costly, he leads them with mercy and wisdom. He allows his children to experience some of the world's pain yet remains with them through it all.

This is God's grace to us. Through suffering in a broken world (broken by us, not by God), he builds our character, strengthens our faith, and prepares us to serve and help others. His strength is revealed in our weakness. Packer writes:

How does God in grace accomplish this purpose [of maturing us]? Not by shielding us from assault by the world, the flesh and the devil, nor by protecting us from burdensome and frustrating circumstances . . . but rather by exposing us to all these things, so as to overwhelm us with a sense of our own inadequacy, he drives us to cling to him more closely. The Bible spends so much of its time reiterating that God is a strong rock, a firm defense, and a sure refuge and help for the weak to bring home to us that *we are weak*, [and must learn] to wait on the Lord.

As C. S. Lewis famously wrote: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pain."

This has been my experience. Other than perhaps daily time with the Lord in reading and prayer, nothing has changed me more than suffering. Nothing has brought me to the end of myself and rooted out self-confidence like suffering.

Do I think God forced me to suffer or took the lives of loved ones so I would learn a lesson? No. This world is cruel, God is good.

But he certainly allows us to live in this broken world without shielding us from its pains and afflictions, and he's been more real to me in my tears and pain than in my laughter and peace.

It's by suffering that we learn patience, endurance, trust, and hope. These are virtues that are impossible to discover apart from pain and suffering.

Good News for Broken Souls

Ours is a world wrecked by sin, and brokenness is the default condition of our relationships, our work, and our bodies. Jesus's redemption of his people comes not through plucking us out of this broken world; he enters our broken world, is born into poverty and hardship, and is called Man of Sorrows as he sets his face toward the cross. Our restoration to God depends on the brutal physical death of the King of the universe—and on his glorious physical resurrection.

As I wrote earlier, we need to know what God has promised and what he hasn't. What's not promised is this: A life free from pain and suffering. But what *is* promised?

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" ([Rev. 21:4-5](#))

See, we have eternity set on our hearts because we were made for an eternal life without pain and suffering. That's why it's so foreign to us here. We were made for a world without suffering, and one day it will be ours.

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Jesus's sufferings remind us he is not unfamiliar with our trials—loss, grief, betrayal, abandonment, physical suffering, even death. But the Christian gospel reminds us Jesus moved through the ultimate suffering—bearing our sin and its penalty, death and separation from God—for us. He did this so that we won't have to. Sure, we face a thousand inward trials. We'll be subjected to frustrating and burdensome circumstances until he returns and makes all things new.

But we are not a people without hope. Our resurrected Lord offers us his presence now and the sure promise of resurrection and new creation later. These trials may indeed last, but they won't have the last word. As Scotty Smith has said, "All death, all evil, all tears—they all have an expiration date." These momentary sufferings are not for nothing; they are maturing us, making us like Christ. They are preparing for us eternal glory.