

Welcome and Reminders

Welcome to any visitors and welcome back to the group members. It is important to remember that everything said and done in this group is confidential. The expectation is that there will not be discussion about our conversations to anyone outside of the group that is represented here and now. We understand that sometimes personal insights or information may be shared by someone who feels comfortable doing so in this group and not around others. Let's be respectful of that and carry our commitment to confidentiality as we leave this group. *(Pass out the confidentiality reminder to anyone who has not yet received one).*

Prayer and Praises

Introduction

Nobody wants to suffer. In fact, most of us try very hard to avoid it. Yet suffering is as much a part of our lives as breathing.

When we think about suffering, we can't help but relate it to our experiences. So I thought I would begin with an objective definition. I found Wikipedia gave a good one:

"Suffering, or pain in a broad sense, is an individual's basic affective experience of unpleasantness and aversion associated with harm or threat of harm. Suffering may be qualified as physical or mental. It may come in all degrees of intensity, from mild to intolerable. Factors of duration and frequency of occurrence usually compound that of intensity. In addition to such factors, people's attitudes toward suffering may take into account how much it is, in their opinion, avoidable or unavoidable, useful or useless, deserved or undeserved."

➤ *Do you feel this is a good definition, or would you change or add to it?*

Over the next few Care Group sessions we will be discussing several aspects of suffering; suffering due to our own poor choices, suffering caused by others, suffering caused by circumstances such as death, illness or disaster, whether or not God causes our suffering, and our reactions to both our own suffering and the suffering of others. We will begin with suffering due to poor choices.

Suffering by Choice

I have a feeling that the majority of humanity's suffering is due to poor choices. I don't mean this to be a put-down. I believe most of us try to make good decisions, but we make them based on what we know at the time. For example, knowing I would get a house in Florida in my divorce, I purchased a mobile home here with the plan to pay it off after selling the Florida house. I bought just before the housing melt down. Now I can't sell the Florida house and am stuck with two mortgages. To top it all off, I am upside down in the mobile home. I felt the decision at the time was sound and responsible. I couldn't foresee the housing bust, and now I deal with the consequences of a situation I had no control over.

An old cliché says "hindsight is always wise". We all can look back at decisions we made and say, "If I had only made the other decision, I wouldn't be suffering now." But if you really think about it, there is no guarantee that taking the other road would not have downfalls as well, and no assurance that you would not be suffering from other consequences.

- *If you are willing, share one or more decisions you made in the past that have since nagged at your spirit over the years and left you thinking your life would have been so much better if you had made another choice.*
- *How could another choice, in the examples shared, produced a different suffering than the choice you made.*

Now let's think about some of the really bad choices that people make that result in suffering; things that lead to addiction, causing an accident because of drinking or distraction, actions done or words spoken out of anger that had disastrous results, choices that cause people to beat themselves up.

- *How can these disasters build our characters, mold our lives, even put people into or out of our lives that, in the long run, have made us better.*

When You Can't Change the Past

Let us remember that everyone makes wrong choices in life. Those choices do not define us, but they do help make us who we are according to how we react to them. Depending on our character, we react in different ways. We can:

- Learn from those choices
- Ignore them
- Hide from them
- Deny them
- Try to blame others for them
- Let them beat us up and destroy us
- Grow stronger and wiser because of them.

- *How do you tend to react to the choices you have made that have not worked out quite as well as you had hoped?*

I'm sure you all know someone who reacts to their own mistakes or bad choices in some of these ways. I once knew a person who would never accept the blame for anything, but always found a way to put the blame on someone else. I believe that when we try to get out of accepting responsibility for our behavior, even if we get away with it, we can only postpone suffering the consequences, and sometimes that results in deeper or longer suffering.

It may be hard, at times, to “fess up” and accept blame when we make mistakes. We may need to apologize, make amends or do something to set things right. But I believe it makes our suffering easier in the long run. If a poor choice causes long term suffering, we can only trust God to use it for good. How many testimonies have we heard of people turning their lives around after ending up in prison? I think of Squeaky Frome, one of those who took part in the Sharon Tate murder. She found Christ in prison and her witness remained a light of God's love to everyone with whom she made contact, until she died, still in prison.

I am always amazed at how people find peace and joy when they let God guide them through their suffering. I think of Joni Eareckson who, at the age of 17, dove into shallow water in Chesapeake Bay and broke her neck. The injury instantly transformed an active teen into a lifelong quadriplegic. Many would consider their life to be over – but Joni made other decisions. During her rehabilitation, Joni spent long months learning how to paint with a brush between her teeth. Her high-detail fine art paintings and prints are sought-after and collected. She served on the National Council on Disability under President Reagan and President Bush and the Disability Advisory Committee to the U.S. State Department under Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. She has received numerous honorary degrees and has written 48 books and numerous magazine articles. No one would blame her if she let her circumstances limit her life, but she made other decisions. Because she was willing, God gave her a wonderful ministry and made her an inspiration to millions.

Are you suffering because of one or more poor choices? If so, know that God loves you unconditionally. God knew the choices you would make, and God knows you are suffering. Allow God to give you strength to get through this time, and receive God's love and comfort. Know also that, if you allow it, you will emerge back into the sunshine with more strength, knowledge and wisdom, and you will be better prepared for whatever God has in store for your future.

- *Keeping in mind that this is a confidential group with a purpose of being committed to one another, does anyone want to share a request for prayer in an area in which they are suffering?*