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Christian Living Study Guide 5: “Suffering With Grace”



Overcoming
Bitterness

and TRIUMPHING
in SUFFERING

CHRIST'S SUFFERING

We first partake of

before we may have the joy of full fellowship with Him or partake in His glory (2 Tim. 2:12). *“That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings...”* Philippians 3:10 *“Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you... But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when His glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.”* 1 Peter 4:12-13

1. What is the benefit of suffering and why does God allow it to happen to His people?



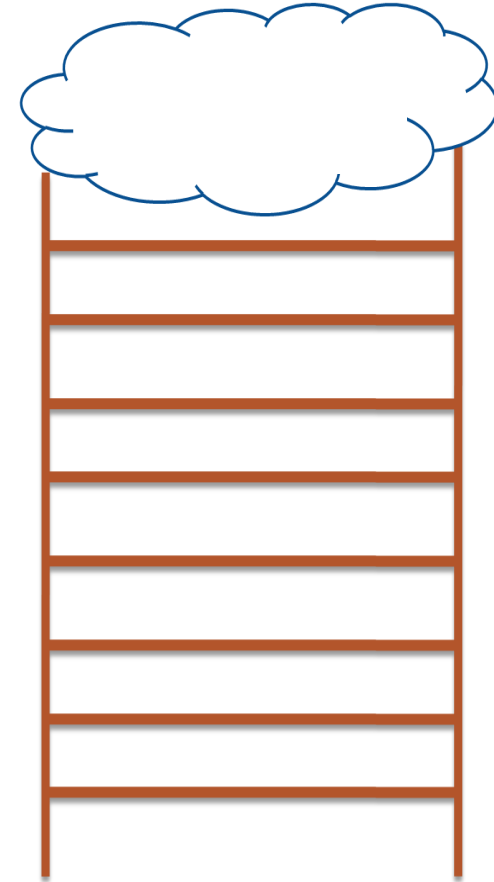
ANSWER: Suffering isn't an unusual experience, in the life of a Christian. The Bible tells us that all who live godly will suffer (2 Timothy 3:12). The Scriptures also assure us that “all things work together for good” in the lives of those who love God (Romans 8:28). This means that God allows suffering into our lives only when it is for a good purpose. Suffering produces several good results:

- Suffering perfects our characters—1 Peter 5:10
- Suffering delivers us from materialism, causing us to focus our attention on that which has eternal value—Philippians 3:8
- Suffering in the flesh destroys our attraction for sin. Thus, suffering is the pain which comes in order for true healing to take place—1 Peter 4:1
- Suffering is the method God uses to “choose” us as His own, as the Bible states in the following verses:

“...Many be called, but few chosen,” (Matthew 20:16). “Behold, I have refined thee, but not with silver; I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction,” (Isaiah 48:10). “If we suffer, we shall also reign with Him...” (2 Timothy 2:12).

LESSON STUDY—5 continued

3) What are the steps of Peter's Ladder for Christ-like Character Development? Fill in the ladder below (see page 10) .



4) What are the seven steps to overcoming bitterness? (page 11)

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

13. What does it mean to “go the extra mile?”

ANSWER: The final step in gaining a forgiving spirit toward our offenders is going the extra mile for them. This means that we are to voluntarily invest something of our time, talents, or resources into the life of our offender, for where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also (Matthew 6:21).

In Christ’s day, the Roman soldiers could command a male twelve years old or older to carry his military pack for one mile in any direction. Many Jews resented this. To them, it was just one more way the dictatorial Roman empire dominated them. But, Christ taught that rather than just going the required one mile, His followers were to go two (Matthew 5:38-40). This command goes dipolar opposite to our natural response to injustice! But the Bible warns that our natural responses are usually wrong (Proverbs 14:12).

But, in the principle of going the extra mile, we reclaim our joy in the Lord, and truly overcome the last vestiges of bitterness! It is also not until we go the “second mile” so-to-speak, that we have opportunities to witness to our offenders. Thus, we should pray and seek the Father’s insights as to how we can invest some voluntary “treasure” in the lives of our offenders. And as we do so, we find a window of Heaven opens flooding us with divine grace to triumph amid the suffering.

LESSON STUDY— 5

1) What does the acronym G.R.E.A.T stand for? And what steps are we to take to triumph over suffering (p 3-4)

G— _____
R— _____
E— _____
A— _____
T— _____

2) What are some of the benefits of suffering, which God has used in trials in your life? (pages 5-7) _____

2. How is bitterness related to a failure to suffer with grace?

ANSWER: If we fail God’s tests of suffering and do not respond to them in a submitted and godly manner, we will become embittered by these experiences rather than tasting triumph.



When fiery trials come our way, like Job of old, we have an opportunity to pass through the experience of suffering in a way that pleases and glorifies God. This is what it means to suffer with grace.

However if, instead of looking with humble submission to God, we focus our attention on the human instrument who “caused” our suffering, we will become angry and embittered towards the “offender.” When we permit the “gall” of bitterness to develop, our soul becomes poisoned (Acts 8:23). Thus, we miss out on the “good” that our Heavenly Father was attempting to accomplish through the trial. Should bitterness be allowed to persist, it is a spiritual cancer that ultimate erodes our relationship with God.

1 John 4:20-21 *“If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from Him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.”*

Ephesians 4:30-32 *“And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”*

3. How can we suffer with grace?

ANSWER: To suffer with grace rather than becoming embittered, we need to respond to trials by using the acronym G.R.E.A.T.

G—Give Thanks

- The Bible tells us plainly that whether we're in a happy or difficult situation, we are to still thank God for the GOOD He is accomplishing in this trial.
- **1 Thess. 5:18**— *“In every thing give thanks for this is the will of God... concerning you.”*
- Thanking God for the trial doesn't mean we are thanking God for evil. It means that we have full faith in God's promise to never allow anything to come our way unless He is using it for good. **We are enabled to thank God for the benefits He is using this trial to produce.**



R—Rejoice

- While giving thanks to God at the first onset of a trial is an act of will, true rejoicing is a spiritual response.
- In order to truly rejoice for the good which God is accomplishing in a trial, we must prayerfully identify its benefits. When we can identify the benefits God is bestowing in our suffering, we can really rejoice, rendering heartfelt praise to our Heavenly King.
- One of the biggest blessings hidden within each instance of suffering is God's work to polish and perfect our characters (Jeremiah 29:11).
- **Romans 8:18**— *“For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”*

E—Engraft Scripture

- When our Saviour faced trials, like the temptations in the wilderness, He responded by quoting appropriate Scripture.
- Claiming Scripture is a powerful way to build faith, enabling us to continue to suffer with grace, fully submitted to God.
- **Romans 10:17**— *“...Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.”*

A—Appeal to God

- When we accept the trial, thank God, rejoice for the benefits He is accomplishing through it, and claim Scripture; we have the right attitude to appeal to God.
- It is appropriate to cry out to God to remove a trial. But, we should ask Him to remove it WHEN He has finished accomplishing the good He intended.

10. How can we develop the faith to trust God, even when He “brings” us into suffering?

ANSWER: The Bible tells us that faith doesn't come by experience or even witnessing miracles, rather it comes by hearing the Word (Romans 10:17). When we “hear” the Scriptures regarding suffering, we find God's purpose in allowing it (see pages 6 & 7). When we rightly discern God's good purpose, we are then able to rightly respond to the situation.

11. What other insights do we need to gain a forgiving attitude toward our offenders?

ANSWER: We need to keep their offenses against us in godly perspective. Our sins are so great that atoning for them cost the Life-Blood of the Son of God. Even so, *“God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,”* Romans 5:8. It is this divine Pattern of forgiveness that all followers of Christ are to imitate.

To illustrate this concept, the Scriptures tell of a man who owed a great debt to the king. Knowing the sum was greater than the man could pay in a lifetime, the king mercifully forgave it in totality. But, the servant refused to give the same clemency to a fellow servant who owed him a pittance by comparison. When the king heard of it, he was angry and “unforgave” the original debt. This story was a parable told to teach what God does, Who has forgiven us a great debt; when we refuse to forgive our human offenders, who have offended us in a proportionately minor way (Matt. 18:32-35 and 6:12-15). When we compare what we owe to God to what our offenders owe us, we gain the right perspective for forgiveness (Matt. 6:12).

12. How are forgiveness and pardon different?

ANSWER: Forgiving someone doesn't automatically imply pardon. Forgiveness involves having a loving attitude toward our offenders. We desire what is best for them. Pardon, on the other hand, has to do with the consequences for a crime. To illustrate, consider this illustration. If a man kills a member of your family, the Bible says forgive him, but you cannot pardon him. He rightly stands guilty before the law of the land. Pardon is the release from the legal penalties of the offense. Forgiveness toward our offenders does not involve lifting the consequences for the “crime.”

8. Why should we thank God for an offense?

ANSWER: The second step to turning bitterness into forgiveness towards our “offenders” is to thank God for the good He is accomplishing through the offense. We need to do this (1 Thessalonians 5:18-19) because it demonstrates that we recognize God as the true Master of our lives. Nothing can come to us that has not passed the “filter” of His protecting Presence. He is powerful enough to stop every attack bringing our “enemies” to an instant defeat, should He desire to do so. The fact that God has allowed a trial to hit us is evidence that He has deemed it “good” in some way (Romans 8:28). Thus, when we belong to God everything which we experience, is really from Him, allowed for a good purpose.



With this assurance, we can grow to have faith in God to the same level as Job. When Job lost his children, his possessions, his wealth, and his health—all in one day—he did not complain against God, become resentful toward his oppressors, or react in any ungodly way. Instead, he wept, put on the sackcloth of mourning and said, “*Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him...*” (Job 13:15).

9. How are our offenders “agents of God?”

ANSWER: Since God is really in charge in our lives, and He only allows situations to come to us that are for good in some way, we need to look past our offender to our loving God. We can more easily forgive the person when we see that God is working through this offender to accomplish His particular purpose.

Godly men in Scripture heeded God’s Authority in this way. Joseph, was sold into slavery by his own brothers, yet forgave them. When his brothers came to him later, Joseph was able to lovingly assure them that although they meant to do him harm by selling him as a slave, but God meant it for good, (Gen. 50:20). Likewise, David recognized his offender, Shimei, as God’s agent (2 Sam. 16:9-10).

- Remain submitted to God, as you pray:

Heavenly Father, I am grateful to You that You have chosen me in this furnace of affliction. I do not wish to reject Your choosing process. Therefore, I ask You to strengthen me to endure this trial in a way that brings glory to Your Name. And I give You my permission to keep me in this trial, just as long as You have something good to accomplish by it. But, as soon as Your good work is finished, I ask You to remove this affliction and deliver me from this suffering, for Your Name’s sake. In Jesus’s Name I ask this, Amen.

- **Psalm 107:13**— “*Then they cried unto God in their trouble, and He saved them out of their distresses.*”

T—Triumph in Bringing Glory to God

- God wants us to respond to trials in a way that even benefits the lives of those who have oppressed us. This response is opposite to our natural hearts.
- **Matthew 5:44** “*Love your enemies (with our heart and spirit), bless them that curse you (with our mouth), do good to them that hate you (with our actions), and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.*”
- Not only does it glorify God when we are kind and loving toward our “offenders,” but also God has promised to give a special reward to those who return good for evil.
- **1 Peter 3:8-9** “*Finally... be courteous: Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing.*”

4. What are some of the benefits of suffering?

ANSWER: There are many benefits which God uses suffering to accomplish in us. In this study, we will identify 16 of these benefits:

- **Suffering is God’s Way of GETTING OUR ATTENTION**— *Sometimes we get so caught up in the “cares of this world,” that the Voice of God seems to get drowned out. As it says in Jeremiah 35:14. God may bring suffering upon us just to get us to look up.*
- **Suffering is an assurance THAT GOD LOVES US and has ADOPTED US AS SONS**— “*For whom the LORD loveth, He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth. If ye endure the chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons...*” Hebrews 12:6-7.

- **Suffering is God’s call for PRAYERFUL SELF-EXAMINATION**—*Sometimes we bring suffering upon ourselves through sinful words or practices. This is why one of our first responses to a trial should be prayerful self-examination. We need to be certain that we have not brought the troubles upon ourselves. We need to confess, and forsake every sin: “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy,” Proverbs 28:13.*



- **Suffering is God’s way of CONQUERING OUR PRIDE** — *The suffering of contention (fighting) reveals pride (Proverbs 13:10). The suffering of destruction is a consequence of pride (Proverbs 16:18).*
- **Suffering is a reminder of OUR WEAKNESSES and NEED FOR DEPENDENCE ON God**—*Perhaps we are suffering under an unchangeable “infirmity,” As we learn to praise God in such trials, we are able to fully experience the power of Christ resting upon us (2 Cor. 12:7-10).*
- **Suffering motivates us to CRY OUT TO God**—*God responds to the cry of His children when they suffer (Psalm 34:17). Suffering motivates us to cry out to God in humble appeal. In suffering, we are to cry out, vocally, to Him, daily (Ps. 86:3, Ps. 3:4 and Ps. 66:18).*
- **Suffering is an opportunity to use SPIRITUAL WARFARE**—*During suffering, Spiritual Warfare is especially necessary. We may recognize a spiritual attack if our suffering takes the form of confusion, suspicion, and division. We are told how to suit up for battle in Eph. 6:11-18.*
- **Suffering is God’s method of PURIFYING OUR FAITH**—*GOD purifies and strengthens our faith, testing it in the fires of affliction (1 Peter 1:6-7). “Knowing this that the trying of your faith worketh patience,” (James 1:3).*
- **Suffering is one way in which God increases our HATRED FOR EVIL**—*When our suffering is caused by the devastating consequences of sin, we are able to see how sin has robbed us of something God planned for us to enjoy. We also can see how our sins have damaged the lives of those we love. This insight increases our hatred of evil. As we count the cost of this sin, we see the need to turn away from it, permanently (Gal. 6:7-8).*
- **Suffering is a reminder to PRAY FOR OUR AUTHORITIES**—*The Bible tells us to pray for those in authority (1 Timothy 2:1-2). When our authorities persecute us for righteousness, it is vital that we pray for them.*

6. How does bitterness affect Christian Character development?

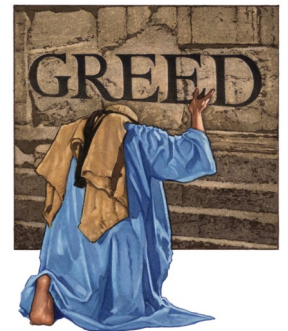
ANSWER: **Becoming embittered against our human “offenders” halts our progress on Peter’s Ladder of Character development.** We are not living by faith, for we have taken our eyes off of God and are focused upon the human. We are not exemplifying virtue, because we cannot harbor the hateful gall of bitterness towards a brother and still walk in a love-bond with God. And thus we are similarly defeated in all the “rungs” of the “ladder.”

Because bitterness is so totally corrupting (Hebrews 12:14-15), it is vital that we overcome bitterness, responding to our offenders with genuine forgiveness instead. There are seven steps to overcoming bitterness:

1. Repent and turn from temporal values.
2. Thank God for the “offenses” - begin using the G.R.E.A.T. response.
3. View your “offender” as “God’s Agent.”
4. Trust God, while seeking to know His good purpose in this suffering.
5. Gain perspective by comparing what you owe God to what your “offender” owes you.
6. Distinguish between forgiveness & pardon.
7. Voluntarily “go the extra mile” for your offender.

7. Do “temporal values” relate to bitterness?

ANSWER: **The very presence of bitterness proves that we have temporal values.** Temporal values involve being more concerned over things that last for a time than things which last for eternity. *“...We look (focus our attention) not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal,” 2 Cor. 4:18.* Temporal values are really a form of idolatry (Col. 3:5). And idolatry is, by spiritual definition, “Expecting benefits from people or possessions which only God can give,” (How to Overcome Bitterness..., by IBLP, p 5). Temporal values cause us to react to people out of fear, greed, covetousness, or defense of our “rights.” Such reactions reveal unsundered areas of the heart.



5. How does God use suffering to perfect our characters? (See Peter's Ladder, pages 8-9)

ANSWER: Our characters are made up by our thoughts, feelings, and actions. When we spend our time thinking about earthly and temporal things, our characters become more worldly. When our feelings are left guided by selfishness, we cannot reflect the loveliness of Christ.

In our natural state, our characters are self-centered and ungodly. We exhibit the “works of the flesh” (Galatians 5:19-21), which are all part of the “old man of sin.” (See Colossians 3:9-10, Ephesians 4:22-24 & Romans 6:6-7). In this state, we are like a diamond, in the rough (see the top right picture). We cannot reflect the Light and loveliness of the Saviour when our “natural man” is still alive and unsur-rendered.



Without the “cutting” experience of trials and suffering, which when patiently endured cut away more and more of our carnal hearts, our selfish old nature continues. But, through trials and suffering, God cuts away these unlovely character traits. Like a jeweler shaping a diamond, we are perfected until we fully refract the light of His Truth and the rainbows of His loveliness. As a diamond has little value until it experiences the cutting. So we look like nothing more than jagged pieces of glass, though we each possess potential for becoming valuable. But what a dramatic change takes place when the diamond has been cut. Now it refracts light and scatters rainbows about. It has become a thing of great value and beauty, because of the cutting.

God refines us in steps, which we call “Peter’s Ladder.” These are the steps of growth, which when fully developed in us, will produce in us the character of Christ. The steps of Peter’s Ladder for Christian Character development are found in 2 Peter 1:5-7. These character qualities are developed in us in this order, starting with faith.


- **Suffering is our signal to RE-EVALUATE OUR PRIORITIES**— *When we fail to spend proper time with God, in prayer and meditating upon His Word, we become vulnerable to transgression, fear, doubt or despair. Such trials are unnecessary (Psalm 127:2). Sometimes by not placing our time with God as a high priority, we get too busy to worship Him on the Sabbath. This results in us suffering spiritual weakness and a loss of connection with God. But, if we have more projects than we can do in six days, we have assumed more work than God intended (Ex. 20:9).*
- **Suffering is God’s means of TESTING OUR WORK**— *The Bible tells us a parable of a wise man who built his house upon a rock and a foolish man who built his house upon the sand. The houses in this parable represent character and whether we are obedient to God or not. The rain came to test the solidity of these “houses” (Matt. 7:24-27). “The fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is...” (1 Corinthians 3:13, 15).*
- **Suffering is God’s way of SIFTING OUR FRIENDSHIPS**— *“A true friend loveth at all times—especially during a time of suffering (Proverbs 17:17). Suffering tests friendships. It reveals true friendship or exposes using relationships.*
- **Suffering is God’s call to IDENTIFY WITH CHRIST**— *Suffering for righteousness’ sake bonds us deeply to the Saviour. As we share in His suffering, we are perfected to share in His glory (1 Peter 4:13 & Romans 8:17).*
- **Suffering is our preparation for COMFORTING OTHERS**— *“Blessed be God... Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ,” 2 Corinthians 1:3-5.*
- **Suffering is a vital part of Peter’s Ladder, developing godly CHARACTER UNTO SPIRITUAL MATURITY**— *As the chart on the following pages shows, without suffering, we cannot fully mature in Christ (2 Timothy 3:12).*

Peter’s Ladder for developing a Christ-like Character Step-by-Step:

2 Peter 1:5-7 “And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity.”

Peter's Ladder of Character Development — 2 Peter 1:5-7

Adapted from How to Overcome Bitterness by Forgiveness by IBLP

Repentance unto SALVATION	SANCTIFICATION in Separation from Darkness	Love and Pursue the LIGHT of TRUTH	Live a Life Dedicated to the SERVICE of the Living God	Patiently ENDURE SUFFERING with Grace	Respond in HUMILITY and GODLINESS to Oppressors	Seek Opportunities to COMFORT Others	Develop into Full Spiritual MATURITY in WITNESS
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Receive Christ as the "Way, Truth and Life..."	Prayerfully discern evil. Then turn away from it in all its forms.	Study the Scriptures to learn the will of God (2 Timothy 2:15). Then walk in the Light from His Word.	Exercise godly restraint against self-centered living and become a "co-laborer" with Christ in the saving of souls.	Endure trials and suffering with a G.R.E.A.T. response 	Respond as God would to those who wrong you.	Be alert to lend comfort and counsel to those who are also suffering.	Guide others through the Scriptural steps you have taken—reproducing Truth in others.
FAITH	VIRTUE	KNOWLEDGE	SELF-CONTROL	ENDURANCE	GODLINESS	BROTHERLY KINDNESS	LOVE
"...If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved," Romans 10:9	"But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood... a peculiar people... Show forth the praises of Him Who hath called you..." 1 Peter 2:9	"...Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind... prove what is that... perfect will of God." Romans 12:2	"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal," Matthew 6:19	"Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you. But rejoice... as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings..." 1 Peter 4:12-13	"For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren," Romans 8:29	"Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God." 2 Corinthians 1:4	"...We preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. Whereunto I also labour..." Colossians 1:28-29