

SUFFERING

Not to be trite, but your objective will very much determine how you play the game.

Baseball and Cricket. Bats, balls, running bases, but vastly different games. The objectives are different.

As a Christian, what is your main objective? Avoid Hell? Get into Heaven? Heavenly rewards...crowns, mansions...or maybe earthly rewards...crowns and mansions?

All in one day, I went from richest man in the world to losing everything I had. All of my wealth, all of my children. It was a bad day. A Job kind of bad day.

I had been in a great mood that day. All was going well. My huge herds of camels, oxen and donkeys were enjoying good weather. My ten children were safely in my oldest son's house enjoying a feast. My wife and I were in our home enjoying each other's company.

Forty-two seconds. That's all it took. In forty-two seconds, four messengers arrived one right after the other, and told their stories of narrowly surviving the calamities that resulted in the loss of my children and all of my resources. In my sadness, I could not imagine it getting worse. It did.

My health vaporized. Boom. My body covered with...with sores head to toe. And the pain? I could not sit, could not stand, could not lay down, shooting, debilitating, pain. Perpetual pain. Couldn't eat, breathe or move...And the desperation. Could I ever have my old life back?

If I could just understand why all these tragedies happened, I could fix them. Possibly. If my suffering was a result of my actions, I would change. What could I possibly have done. Even God says I was righteous and blameless, so why should I have to suffer?¹ I wracked my brain trying to work it out. Why did this happen to me?

¹ Job 1:8, 2:3

If you've read my story in the Bible, you know that I was never given the reasons for why I suffered, so join the disappoint club. You also know that I gave God the credit for blessing me and for taking away those blessings, although I did not blame him.

"The Lord gave, and the Lord took away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Famous for that line.

I finally got the chance to converse with the Lord, and he did not give me answers to my questions. Instead, he answered a different set of questions...questions that I had not asked. Instead of asking "why", I should have been asking "who." "Who are you, Lord?"

The answers to that question, and there are many, resulted in a complete change in my relationship with God. A change in objective. That change was far more important than the elimination of my suffering, at least to me. And, a lot of you aren't going to like this but it could have only happened through my suffering.

In an English version of the Bible, it's hard to see, but in the original Hebrew the change in my relationship with God is clear. Throughout the story, my friends and I typically call God "Elohim" or "El Shaddai." These not-so-personal names acknowledge God as the creator, God as the ruler of everything. A god who is there but somewhat distant from his creation. My suffering and our conversation...the way I saw him changed completely. Bats, balls, running bases, still the same, objective? Entirely changed. I came to see him as, "Yahweh", a god personally involved with his people. Not abstract, not far away, here, involved, even at the point of my suffering. He went from being *a* god to being *My* God. A different game entirely.

Through the centuries people have said it was completely unfair for a righteous man like me to have to suffer so badly. Was it completely unfair for Jesus to suffer so badly? It appears that suffering was a part of God's plan, had to be fulfilled. God's Servant would be "despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain."² is how Isaiah prophesied it. That entire section in the book of Isaiah is known as the Suffering Servant passage.

Not only did Jesus not deserve to suffer, but he willingly took on the pain and suffering of his followers.³ And he knew ahead of time that he would be doing so.⁴

The followers of Jesus often point to the pain and suffering Jesus endured by being crucified, but the suffering started long before that. May have even peaked in the

² Isaiah 53:3

³ Isaiah 53:4

⁴ Luke 24:26

Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus said, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."⁵

It was God's will to reunite humankind with him, this would require that the innocent Jesus had to suffer. It was through suffering Jesus, the Son of God, learned obedience and was perfected.⁶ The writer of Hebrews said that. It seems suffering is part of certain objectives

The Apostle Paul probably had more influence on Christianity than anyone except Jesus. When Paul was first converted, he was told he would suffer greatly for the cause of Jesus. He was told this by Jesus.⁷ It happened as Jesus said, as Paul would attest to over and over. Paul was the *first* one to recognize that his immense amount of suffering was well worth it.

Both Jesus and Paul were adamant in saying the followers of Jesus will suffer. Not *might* suffer, but *will* suffer. It is through suffering that many of Jesus's servants will be tested and perfected. Jesus's followers can cling to their belief and hope in the final outcome. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble, but take heart! I have overcome the world."⁸

Satan, our consummate adversary, wants to use suffering to get God's people to turn away from him. I know this better than anybody. He uses suffering to get people to doubt the power and goodness of God. Satan uses suffering to get people to concentrate on the wrong questions. And then the objectives? Well, the wrong objectives keep you playing the wrong game.

As the world's first famous sufferer, I recommend that you use times of suffering to deepen your relationship with God, to be faithful to the end. Use it to refine and purify your heart, to get to know God better and better. To change your objective and change the game. To move from knowing him as only as Elohim and El Shadai, creator and ruler, to come closer to Yahweh, the personal name for the God. Make a good relationship with him your sole objective.

⁵ Matthew 26:38-39

⁶ Hebrews 5:

⁷ Acts 9:16

⁸ John 16:33