

The Final Step in Redeeming Suffering

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Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

2 Corinthians 1:3-5

Susan sat back amazed at what God had done in the last ten months. That treacherous night was just less than a year ago. A man, who had been stalking her for months, broke into Susan's house, raped her, and ran off into the night. The violation was only part of the suffering. There was getting tested for STD's and pregnancy, insomnia, anxiety attacks, and social phobia from walking through crowds wondering "Is that him?"

Susan is doing remarkably well. All tests came back negative. She is averaging seven hours of continuous sleep a night. Through counseling she has not had a panic attack in three months and she is able to enjoy shopping at the mall again. Susan has even resolved many of her hard questions concerning God's providence and protection. Life is back to "normal." Yet it does not seem like the process is complete. She had heard people speak of *closure*, but for her, life just seems to be picking up where it left off.

When you spoke with Susan, she was not upset about how God worked in her life, but she could not shake this idea that there was a next step she was not finding. Then it happened. It was not planned. Susan noticed that one of her co-worker friends, Maria, had missed a couple of days of work. In her normal compassionate way, she called to make sure that everything was O.K. Maria's emotions were pent up and waiting for an outlet. Without interruption Maria spent an

hour telling how she had been raped in her home three nights ago. The total conversation was three and half hours.

While Susan listened, she monitored her own emotional response to hearing an eerily similar tale. There were emotional peaks and valleys as Susan's heart broke, feared, and raged. Instinctively, Susan began to walk Maria through a protocol of contacting the authorities and appropriate medical professionals. She affirmed many of the emotions and questions that Maria had not even been able to put into words yet. Susan took two vacation days to go with Maria to the many appointments and help Maria "face the world" again.

Over the next few weeks and months, Maria was moved to tears many times by Susan's love, compassion, and understanding. In the midst of discussing "How did you ever get through this?" Susan had the opportunity to share her faith. She spoke of how important faith, Christian friends, the truth of Scripture, and prayer had been. Maria accepted Christ as Savior as a result of Susan's testimony.

Some days later, Susan was alone in her home reflecting over the events of the last couple of months. Then it hit her. "I have *closure*." She was not sure when it came, but for the first time she could say something like, "I see God's wisdom in allowing me to experience what I did.

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I am grateful to have been able to minister to Maria in a way that I otherwise would not have. While I would never have chosen to be raped in my home, I don't know that I would change it now even if I could." The idea of "rejoicing in my suffering" (Colossians 1:24) began to make more and more sense

Susan's suffering was fully redeemed. It was transformed from a weapon in Satan's arsenal that produced despondency to an instrument in God's hand to bring hope. This does not mean that Susan never experiences difficult emotions due to her experience, but it does mean that she has been able to incorporate this tragic event into God's story of grace and redemption in her life.

It is important to remember that this article is focusing upon the final stages of God's work of comfort in Susan's life. With that in mind, consider how 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 makes sense of Susan's experience.

world with intricate details and a durably, delicate balance (Job 38). God is holy, perfectly perfect in all of His actions and judgments (Leviticus 11:44).

But God is also tender and patient (II Peter 3:9). When we are hurting, we can come to God in trust that He is the Author and Master of compassion (Psalm 103:13). God knows the condition of our heart (Acts 15:8; Hebrews 4:12). He uses this ability not only to weigh obedience and allegiance, but also to provide comfort. When our thoughts cry out, "Does anyone understand?" we can be certain that our experience is resonating in the mind of our loving Heavenly Father.

B. Comforts in All Our Affliction... ...What God Does.

As a counselor, I often advise people to avoid emphatic language in their communication. Words such as always, never, only, and must

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A. God of All Comfort... ...Who God Is.

God models everything that He calls us to do. More accurately, God's character is the glorious image our obedience is to reflect in the world we live. A prerequisite for comforting others is having a first-hand, accurate knowledge of who God is. While suffering we often tends to view God through the lens of our experience—tough and hard (i.e., Elijah in I Kings 19:1-8)—rather than as He truly is—the God of all comfort.

God has many astounding attributes that should awe us and cause us to stand back in holy wonder. God is all powerful, able to bring the universe into existence with the words of His mouth (Genesis 1). God is all wise, creating our

tend to ignite conversations into arguments. The reason is that we can inevitably find an instance when an absolute claim is untrue. Has your husband really *always* annoyed you? Have your children actually *never* cleaned their rooms? Is the *only* thing you ask from your wife is for the house to be straight when you get home?

Yet, Paul boldly claims that God comforts us in *all* our affliction. Create your laundry list of afflictions from the most excruciating to the most mundane: death of a loved one, abuse from a family member, rape, being left by a spouse, disease, chronic pain, failing a test, not getting a promotion, lack of direction in life, or relational conflict. Paul's claim is that God is sufficient to provide comfort in *all* of these afflictions.

Notice, this is not a promise for deliverance from suffering, although God may graciously choose to do so. It is a promise to provide comfort *in* our affliction. Paul makes it clear that in this world we will suffer (I Peter 4:13). Part of having a right understanding of who God is involves recognizing what He calls His children to do—sacrificially carry His message of redemption to the ends of the earth (Luke 9:23; II Corinthians 5:20).

God’s unwavering ability to comfort changes the question we ask in the midst of suffering. Instead of asking, “Is God here? Does God care? Can God help?” we ask, “How do I access God’s comfort? What are God’s intended means for provide comfort in this situation?” The questions that we ask in the midst of suffering provide direction to our thoughts and fuel to our emotions. The first set of questions lead to feelings of isolation, hopelessness, and resentment toward God. The second set of questions point us towards hope, Scripture, a deeper understanding of God, a closer connection with our church, and more meaningful/effective prayer.

Assuming the answer to these questions is *yes*, we will explore how our worship response culminates the redeeming process. We will do this by answering three questions: Why is this considered a worship response?; How should I understand the redeeming process?; and How do I enact what this passage says I should do?

Sharing the way in which God worked to redeem an episode of suffering is worship because it makes the goodness, wisdom, compassion, power, and activity of God known to other people. It creates an echo of appreciation and awe at what God has done.

When your story is shared with someone who has experienced a similar struggle, it encourages and equips that person to persevere in trusting God. In this sense, your testimony is building up the Body of Christ. Making God known and building up His people for more effective service are what worship is about.

Comforting others with your testimony is the logical capstone of the redemption process. First of all, it causes you to reflect upon the activity of

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C. That We May Be Able to Comfort... ...Our Worship Response.

The first two sections of this article equip us to respond to this call of ministry. In fact, if you have not heard your heart saying “Amen” to the prior two sections, it is probably that you need to spend some time reviewing those stages. Do you see God as one who comforts? When times of suffering arise, do your instincts tell you to run to God? Are you more familiar with God’s means of comfort? Can you make a list of the people, Scripture passages, and events He used to bring you through your difficulty?

God throughout your episode of suffering. In our hurried lives we take for granted so much that God does. Often in telling our stories we notice the details of God’s handiwork that we would have otherwise missed.

It is not uncommon for people to make it through a difficult episode of suffering, overcome any problematic emotions, but still feel like the process is incomplete. The testimony of Susan is one example. One reason for this emotion is that God does not comfort us for the sole purpose of making us feel better. God comforts us *so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any*

affliction. The reason the process seems incomplete is because it is.

Notice that Paul says “any” affliction. While there is benefit to a shared experience, God does not have to drag us through every trash can of life to equip us to encourage others. In suffering, we all come to know the same “God of all comfort.” In our testimonies we are not offering hope from within us, but pointing people towards the God of hope and comfort. This reinforces why parts A and B of this article are vital. Our stories, to be effective, must adhere to the Scriptural pattern: (1) Know the God of all comfort; (2) understand God’s means of applying comfort; and (3) Share the comfort you have received.

generate a perpetual attitude of thankfulness in your heart.

3. Use a four part outline to organize your thoughts (see page 5): (a) the episode of suffering; (b) attributes of God and means of grace you came to know through suffering; (c) how God used each means of grace in your list; and (d) ways that God has shaped your character or prepared you to comfort others because of your suffering.
4. Pick a trusted friend or family member to share your story with. Let them know it is a step of faith you are taking and that you would appreciate their feedback.

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Application

The items below are intended to be completed in the order they are written. They are written in a manner that increases insight into God’s activity in your life and an increasing call to availability on your part. The pace at which you complete these items, or whether you choose to complete all six should be matter of prayer and consultation with a trusted Christian friend, pastor, or counselor.

1. Make a list of every means of grace that God used in your experience of suffering. To make the list longer, be as specific as possible (i.e., list the specific people, events, prayers, Scripture, etc... that God used).
2. Give thanks for each of the items on your list. Write a letter of appreciation to each of the people. Create mementos for special locations. Use the list to help

Ask them to tell you what aspects of God’s character or means of God’s grace stood out to them from hearing your story.

5. Consider submitting your story for publication. Review your story and make some of the details more generic (i.e., change names, ages, places, etc...). Crossroads periodically has a segment in our newsletter entitled “Testimonies of Hope.” Our desire is to create a tool for people to anonymously share how God has worked to redeem their difficult times.
6. Write your story as a narrative (like Susan’s story above). Share it with your pastor and let them know that you want to be available to help people from your church who have a similar struggle.

OUTLINING GOD'S ACTIVITY IN MY SUFFERING

Key aspects of your episode of suffering

Attributes of God and means of grace you came to know through suffering

How God used each of means of grace in your list (see application #1)

Ways that God has shaped you or prepared you to comfort others because of your suffering
