

Willing to Suffer?

READING
Philippians 1
Romans 9
Luke 17

For it's been granted to you on behalf of the Anointed, not only to trust in him, but also to suffer on his behalf.

Have you heard about Dave? He won the lottery.
Oh that's good.
No, it's bad. His wife took most of the money and ran off with another guy.
Oh that's bad.
No, it's good. There was plenty left, and Dave had always wanted to learn to fly.
Oh that's good.
No, it's bad. The engine died on his first solo flight!
Oh that's bad.
Not that's good. There was a parachute.
Oh that's good.
No, it's bad. It didn't open!
Oh that's bad.
Not that's good. There was a huge haystack.
Oh that's good.
No, it's bad. There was a pitchfork sticking up.
Oh that's bad.
Not that's good. He missed the pitchfork.
Oh that's good.
No, it's bad. He missed the haystack.

Just a childish joke really, but it illustrates that until you get to the end of the story you don't know if it's good or bad.
Like life. Have you ever had what you thought was a good thing happen, but as a consequence, something bad happened?
Or the other way, something bad happened, but as a consequence something good happened?

I used to be study leader for some teen adventure camps in the mountains near the city where I lived. They were heaps of fun, and lasting a week, they gave the teens a great opportunity to slow down a bit from life and think about important things.

This particular camp was mountain biking, and sleeping in tents each night. (We had a 4WD support vehicle to carry the tents. It was fantastic). But all day riding up and down mountain trails and back roads. With nights around a camp fire.

So we had stopped at the top of a mountain for our morning break. And everyone had practised and quoted their two memory verses for the day. I had been helping one guy, and I stayed a little longer as we discussed some issues he was having. But then we had to race pretty fast down the mountain to catch the others for lunch.

At the bottom of the hill I was going to be giving a talk around "how can it ever be good to suffer?" Aiming to end up with illustrating how Yeshua was willing to do that to save us. I had the talk worked out, but felt it could still use something, so on the way down the mountain I was still praying, asking God for one more illustration of some suffering which was beneficial.

We caught up to the stragglers right at the bottom of a pretty steep, straight section of the narrow track, and as I moved across to overtake them, the track took a sharp left turn, and I hit some very loose gravel. My front wheel slid out, I recovered, but couldn't make the turn. I did a somersault, landing on my back, and looking up I saw my bike go sailing over my head.
Fortunately we were all wearing helmets, because mine had a 50c sized hole in the back of it where it had landed on a sharp rock. My arm was a bit funny, and my bike wasn't looking too good. But only 200m to the lunch spot, so I walked my bike over there and the support guys took care of it.

During my talk I kept dropping my note paper, (just a small pocketbook sized piece of paper). It was like I had no strength in my fingers to squeeze it. I felt the talk went pretty well anyway, even without the extra illustration.

After lunch I was taken off to a hospital half an hour away just for a check up.
My arm was broken! (That explained the dropping of the paper). The bone was separated into two pieces, with about 1cm (1/3") gap between them. But because of the swelling which would happen they gave me a half cast and booked me in for a hospital near home a week later to get the full one.

When I got back in the evening the kids were all quite busy discussing suffering! "He was standing there with a broken arm giving us a talk on suffering!" It really hit them, and really challenged their conclusions about Yeshua. Wow.
(God answered my extra illustration prayer after all, just not the way I was expecting!)

When I got home that weekend I went to our Youth Church that night and they prayed for my arm to be healed. (Like people do, out of caring, but without expecting anything really). And then a few days later I went to the hospital so they could put the full cast on for 6 weeks. (Which was also going to mean I was without work and income for 6 weeks because my job needed me to use a computer all day). Anyway, because the bones had been separated by such a gap, the doctor there wanted to do an x-ray to make sure that they were still lined up properly before setting them.
She came back in just staring at the x-ray and shaking her head. I asked if it was all OK. She said, "Better than OK, we can't even see that it was ever broken. You can go home."
(Without a cast).

We don't like suffering at the time. But it can be a good thing.
As Paulus wrote at the end of Philippians 1. "For it's been granted to you on behalf of the Anointed, not only to trust in him, but also to suffer on his behalf — having the same struggle which you've seen in me, and you now hear of in me."
In fact, Paulus here is saying that it's a blessing. It's something which has been granted to us.

One time when I was working in Silicon Valley we heard that our main competitor was going to announce a big advance in their product at a trade show coming up in about a month. I decided we could do that too. So I worked 10-12 hours a day, 7 days a week for a month or so. I got it done, and possibly saved our company.
But towards the end I was just always tired. Come 3 o'clock in the afternoon I was just exhausted and I would take a half hour nap on the couch in my office.

So after the product was released, I went to the doctor who gave me a simple test and said, "Yep. You've got mono (glandular fever)".
So, ... weeks of bedrest, and minimal contact with other people to stop it spreading.
I went home to bed. It was youth group night, so my wife rang the youth group leader, and they all prayed for me to be healed. And I slept deeply for pretty much 30 hours straight. But then I woke up feeling great. (But with mono you usually do feel good first thing in the morning). So I sat in bed all day, but still feeling great. Not exhausted like had become normal.
Next day I woke up again feeling great. So I rang the doc who said that I still had weeks to go, but said if I came in he could confirm it with another test.
He came back in with the test result shaking his head, "I've never seen anything like this. You're completely free of mono."

On Sunday I went to church. And the youth group kids were like, "Why are you here! Don't you have mono!", and they were very reluctant to shake my hand. But I reassured them, and that I had another test which was negative. (They were still pretty hesitant).

So in both these cases, (and I have others), my suffering was used by Yahweh to challenge and build people up. (Including me!).
I wouldn't take either of them back.

Suffering isn't usually even illness. In the New Testament it's mostly the treatment that Christians received at the hands of those who hated them. But these two stories are just aimed at illustrating that whatever suffering you are enduring, ... it might have a good outcome. You can't know for sure while you're in the middle of it. You can only know later on, looking back, once you know the end of the story.

And possibly your suffering is much worse than mine. (Both mine are pretty minor really compared to most of the other stories I've heard). But please let me encourage you to look for the positives in yours. Look for how it is bringing about some good, especially if that is in someone else's life. I hope you'll find it.
Perhaps God is using you to bless others after all? Just not the way you thought.

Are you willing to welcome your suffering if it helps others come to Yeshua, or to grow in him?