

Suffering:

How God Gives Gifts Sometimes



I really love gifts, especially ones that hover.

I don't know if you've ever received a gift that hovers. I hadn't until recently. I usually give normal kinds of gifts, like clothes or jewelry or gift cards. And I get the same kinds of gifts in return, except for the jewelry. But the best gift I have been given was an amazing little remote control helicopter called an Air Hog. It is made of plastic and Styrofoam, so it's not very expensive. But incredibly, it flies much like a regular helicopter. I can make it hover, fly around the room, and (with a fair bit of practice) land on my wife's head.

Anna gave me the Air Hog, and I'm forever grateful to her for it, but I suppose it shouldn't be in the category of "best gifts ever," particularly if I'm thinking about God and trying to figure out how to want more of Him. It should go without saying that the gift of Jesus is the best gift we could ever imagine. The other gifts, like family, friends, a house, food, health, and so forth are all good gifts from God, things we don't deserve but that He's pleased to give to us. But God gave me one more gift recently, something I didn't ask for but He evidently thought I needed.

His gift was a sickness.

This is not a normal gift, and as much as it's in your control, it's not something I'd recommend you give to anyone. God didn't give it to me on my birthday or Christmas; I opened it up one afternoon while in San Jose for work. This particular gift was a nasty sore throat. I'll spare you the details, but it didn't look good. I try to go to the doctor once every five years if possible, but my throat looked pretty bad, so I called around the city to see if I could find anyone to see me. Striking out, I decided I had to go somewhere, so I drove to the ER.

When I arrived, I found a packed house. The waiting room was already full of people even though it was only early afternoon. One man had a bandage on his head; another limped around on what appeared to be a broken ankle. One woman sat in a wheelchair, fast asleep and looking like she might fall out of her chair at any moment. I signed in, was told the wait might be a couple of hours, and took my seat across from this woman, prepared to dive in and catch her if she fell.

I pulled out my Bible and a book and started reading. After two hours, I was called to the next station, where an attendant collected more personal information and told me again the wait might be a couple of hours. I took my seat once more and resumed my reading. Another hour went by, then another. I went back to one of the stations and asked if they knew how long it might be before I would be seen. I was told it would be a couple of hours. It was well into evening at that point, and I soon realized I might be there all night. I looked around at the rest of the room, now full to the brim with hurting and injured people who might be there all night as well.

That was when my internal pager began beeping. I tried to ignore it as I so often do, but as I have already described, it is extremely difficult to turn off. The call was from the Spirit, and God was asking me to get up from

my chair, walk over to the far side of the room, and ask if anyone was interested in talking about God or the Bible or Jesus.

I had no interest in doing this, and I told God so outright. Apparently, He was still interested in my obedience because the beeping continued. I came up with an excuse: These people were here because they were injured and wouldn't want to be bothered by some Bible-wielding guy with a sore throat. But God seemed to think they might want to be bothered. I came up with another excuse: If someone was really interested or had a question about God, they could plainly see I was reading a Bible, and they could ask me. Evidently, God preferred the proactive approach that night.

Slowly and steadily the beeping continued, bringing me to a point of decision. The Spirit finally asked me, *Are you willing to do what I am asking you to do?*

I went back and forth for several minutes until I decided that yes, I was willing, although it was an extremely reluctant yes. So there I sat, ready to go and do this thing that would probably make me terribly uncomfortable. But I didn't move. I tried to talk myself into it again, but it didn't work. I was stuck to my seat. I bowed my head to pray, but actually I did this only to delay doing what I had already reluctantly agreed to do.

Finally, filled with what I perceived to be courage from God in the midst of my fear, I grasped my Bible, stood up, walked around the sleeping woman still slumped on the edge of her wheelchair (making sure not to bump into her in the slightest way lest she fall right out of that seat), and approached the far side of the room. As I arrived, I paused momentarily, gazing at all of the people sitting quietly in their seats or on the floor, and I let the tension of the moment build slightly. I started to open my mouth, but no words came out, and I started walking again—straight into the bathroom.

Have you ever gone into a bathroom at a party or a dinner only because you were feeling awkward and didn't know what else to do? I have, and

that is exactly why I found myself in front of the sink. I washed my hands, not because they were dirty, but because I had to do something to justify being there.

After I dried my hands, I looked at myself in the mirror, breathed in deeply, prayed a short prayer for courage, and turned to exit the room. I opened the door into a hallway strewn with people sitting against the walls in both directions. I didn't pause this time.

"Hi," I said, realizing I was off to a great start when I saw all eyes lift to see who was breaking the silence. "I've been over there reading my Bible, and since we're all sitting here for what looks to be a long time, I wanted to see if anyone had any thoughts or questions about the Bible or God or Jesus. Maybe something you've always wanted to know but never gotten a good answer to."

Everyone stared at me, and nobody said a word. I think a faucet dripped, or a cricket chirped, or a pin dropped, or something like that. My mind began racing. *Did no one hear me? Maybe I should ask again. Or maybe I should go back and wash my hands once more.*

Finally, a woman down the hall said, "Do you think God can make this line go any faster?" Everyone laughed. *That's right*, I thought, *ha ha ha—real funny*. A man in front of me chimed in: "I think we all just want to see a doctor and that's all."

This was embarrassing. I had done what God asked me to do, and it wasn't working out as I had imagined it would. In my head, everyone within earshot was supposed to gather at my feet in hopeful anticipation, hearts ready to respond to the altar call I would give at the end of my gospel presentation.

People were at my feet, but that was because they were already sitting on the floor. No one gathered.

There was, however, plenty of awkward silence. And a lot of staring. Finally, a young man with long hair and a beard looked up at me and said, "Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, man." I said, "Right on, bro" and sat down to continue what seemed to be a promising conversation. But our exchange didn't work out as I imagined it would. He told me he was there because of a spider bite on his rear, and it was the second time it had happened, and he couldn't figure out why the spiders were so fond of the inside of his shorts. He said he missed his soul mate, and when I asked what happened to her, he said he hadn't met her yet. He said *man* a lot. The conversation wasn't heading much of anywhere, and it soon ended without an altar call.

I said my pleasantries in parting as I stood to go, and I decided I'd give this whole question thing one more shot. So I went to another part of the room where I repeated my invitation to talk. All of those people stared at me as well, a cricket chirped...you know the drill. One woman kind of smiled at me, and I took that as a sign she might be interested in talking. So I asked her again, but she giggled and said no.

This also was embarrassing. I had persisted in obedience even after a rough start, and I reasoned that God owed me this time. Surely, someone in the ER would be brought to a saving knowledge of Jesus. But no—just more awkward silence.

Finally, a young woman a couple of rows away finally yelled out, "I have a question." *Thank you! I don't know who you are and don't care if you don't want to hear about the gospel. I'm just glad I don't have to stand here anymore looking at these people staring at me.* So I ran over to her, introduced myself, and asked her what her question was.

What transpired was a beautiful beginning to the gospel. She asked me what the Bible said about sinners going to heaven. I told her lots of sinners went to heaven. Having no sin wasn't the point; the point was whether

or not you have Jesus, or Jesus has you. She told me she knew very little about the Bible but wanted to know more about God. So I began to tell her the redemptive story of the Bible and its star, Jesus.

The conversation flowed well; she asked great questions, and God provided me with sufficient answers. Her little eight-year-old cousin even asked if she could sit with us and listen. But this beautiful beginning came to a sudden stop. She said her illness made it hard to concentrate, but she really wanted to hear, and would I wait for about two minutes until she came back? I nodded my head and started asking her cousin how old she was and where she went to school and all the other questions you might ask a child.

A few minutes later, the woman returned and said she really wanted to hear more but just couldn't concentrate on having a conversation. I didn't want to press the matter on her, so I smiled and said, "It was great talking to you." As she walked away, I sat there feeling as if a bird had just snatched away the gospel seed from the path.¹ I saw her later on that evening, carrying on a conversation with the spider-bite guy of all people, and I wondered why she had seemed so receptive at first and why she had eventually closed her heart to my words.

To be honest with you, I was bummed. Not so much because her eyes weren't opened to the truth but because there was no payoff for me. I had done something hard for God, and I'd faced ridicule, and I'd pressed on and had the joy of sharing the gospel with someone, and it didn't go anywhere. As I mentioned before, I felt as if God owed me.

So I went back to my seat, discouraged in my spirit but also ticked off that I had been sitting in that room for six hours without seeing a doctor. As I grumbled, another young woman came and sat in the open seat next to me. My internal pager beeped once more, and I looked outside for a nearby lake to throw it into. This time, the Spirit asked me to strike up a conversation with this woman but not use my "Who wants to talk about Jesus?" thing.

But I just sat there. For more than half an hour, I held a conference call with the Spirit over the merits of striking up a conversation with the young woman. I had already obeyed God once, and nothing significant came of it, so I didn't think anything significant would come of another conversation. The Spirit encouraged me to have a little faith.²

I was already embarrassed by standing up and asking all those people my questions, and now I just wanted to blend into the crowd. The Spirit reminded me of Jesus' promise that He would be with me always.³

I was also sick and tired, literally, of waiting to see a doctor and frankly didn't care anymore. The Spirit reminded me of Paul's tireless ministry for the sake of Jesus and the gospel.⁴

As I fought with God, I tried to distract myself by reading. I happened upon a story of a Masai warrior from Kenya named Joseph who got saved after meeting someone on a road outside his village, went back to his village to share the good news, and got the stuffing beat out of him. In fact, he was beaten so badly that he was dragged by the villagers out into the bush and left for dead. He woke up three days later, covered in cuts and bruises, but he decided to go back into the village to share the gospel once more. Again, he was beaten senseless, left for dead, and woke up days later. But his joy in Christ and his love for his village compelled him to go back. This third time, he was again beaten for perhaps the last time, and as he passed out from the pain, he saw the villagers begin to weep. When he awoke, he was in his own bed, being nursed back to health by the villagers who had nearly beaten him to death. The village had come to Christ.⁵

Joseph the Masai demonstrated the worth and value of the gospel and of Jesus, his prized possessions, things for which he was willing to suffer. And his village came to see God's glory because Joseph valued God's glory more than his own life. As I thought of him, beaten and left for dead, getting up time and time again to go back and do what God had called

him to do, I was sickened by my hesitation. Joseph faced barbed wire and fists; I had faced only a stinging word or two. Feeling ashamed, I thought better of my disobedience.

So I turned to this woman seated next to me and asked, "What brought you to the ER?" We spent the next two hours walking through her story: She was 20 years old and had two kids out of wedlock and had abused drugs and alcohol for the past three years. She had also tried to kill herself three months before that time, and she was in the ER to treat ovarian cysts. She confided to me that she used to go to church but hadn't been since the birth of her firstborn because she was too ashamed of what she had done. But by the end of our conversation, she had reaffirmed her faith in Jesus and committed to start reading her Bible again. She also made plans to attend church that weekend for the first time in years.

This was a good ending, and it was a good payoff. But it should have been a good story and a good payoff even if nothing else had happened that night. The point of the night for me wasn't about the good that comes from evangelism. I think God may sometimes ask us to stand up in public and ask, "Who wants to talk about Jesus?" and at other times He may just ask us to start a normal conversation with someone. I think the point of the night had to do with the gift He had given me, the gift of sickness and a trip to the ER and all the good that comes from suffering.

Jesus said, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven."⁶ This is not something I can immediately grasp. I had faced persecution that night, although in a very small way, and I didn't feel blessed. I felt angry, embarrassed, ashamed, tired, sick, and guilty, but I didn't feel blessed.

I know the Christian life is filled with paradox, but I wondered if this was taking it a little too far. Should I call my sore throat a gift from God? Wouldn't

it make more sense to say I got a sore throat for no reason at all, and God simply took my sore throat and then made some good out of it?

I went back to Scripture and started reading all the verses I could find on suffering. This was not a fun exercise. I found passage after passage that kept linking the Christian life to suffering, and as I looked at my own life and how very little I had suffered, I began to wonder what I might be missing. I wonder how you might react to some of the Scriptures, what you would think when you read them, whether you'd be confused by them or be angry at them or find some sort of hope in them.

Here are a few comments from Jesus: "You will be hated by all for my name's sake." "Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you."⁷

If those weren't enough, here are a couple from Peter: "If when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called." "Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking."⁸

Or Paul, no stranger to suffering: "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake."⁹

All of these statements are tough to deal with, but the last statement is the one that blows my mind. How can Paul, the same Paul who was lashed, beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked, imprisoned, hungry, cold, and in constant toil and hardship, say, "It has been granted to you...[to] suffer"? Did he really just call suffering a gift?

If suffering is a gift, I guess I can understand why Jesus calls us blessed when we are persecuted, why Peter tells us to rejoice in suffering, and why James tells us to consider our trials as cause for joy.¹⁰ After all, gifts are blessings. I

like gifts, especially ones that hover, but I suppose this means I should also like gifts like sore throats, even if they are a very small kind of suffering.

But that's the issue: How do I go about learning to rejoice in suffering? Enjoying a flying helicopter or a new surfboard is easy, but receiving a sickness or ridicule with joy is much more difficult. I know my ridiculously skinny spirit needs more of Jesus, and I know He was "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief," so maybe I can learn from Him how to rejoice in suffering.¹¹

I would expect the Bible to make much of Jesus' suffering, to make a show of how much pain He endured on our behalf. If I were Jesus, and my Spirit were inspiring the writing of the Gospels, I'd make sure everyone knew I suffered more than anyone else ever had, that I had suffered the most and nothing could add to what I had gone through.

But Paul wrote, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body, that is, the church."¹² *Filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions?* What on earth is Paul talking about? How could Jesus be lacking in anything? Jesus certainly suffered while He was here on earth. For three years, He was in ministry and faced homelessness, harsh living conditions, instability, unbelief, taunts, rejection, slander, a constant onslaught of people in need, sleepless nights, extended periods of fasting and temptation, and death threats. And His betrayal, arrest, false trial, beatings, crucifixion, and broken union with the Father at the climax of the cross brought pain and suffering we can't even imagine.

Yet in spite of all the hardship Jesus suffered in His life, Paul seemed to believe something was still lacking in His afflictions. And Paul was intent on filling up what was lacking for the sake of Christ's body, the church.

I didn't know what to make of all this, so I began to pray about it. Feeling

somewhat ashamed that my life has been virtually pain free (except in CST), and knowing I've experienced very little hardship, I began to ask God how I might be able to fill up the remainder of Christ's afflictions. I don't think I actually prayed for suffering, but I think I came close.

God answered that prayer in His own way, in His own time, and in very small steps for me. I began to encounter minor trials of every kind: physical, emotional, and spiritual. I had hurt my legs while running the LA Marathon a few years earlier, and they started hurting once more. I went to rehab for months but could never fix the problem. A few weeks later, I went through a difficult period in my Christian community, facing the darkness of my own heart as well as persecution from other believers. I won't go into the details, but the going was tough for a while. And a few weeks after that, I was diagnosed with an iron overload disorder, a sickness that required me to give a pint of blood every week for several months straight.

All of these struggles, as small as they may have been, came in regular succession. A time of trial would come, and I would wrestle with it, praying about it and trying to figure out God's purpose in it all. After a while, I'd feel a sense of peace from God about whatever was going on, somewhat confident that I had endured my trial and learned what I needed to know about suffering. But then something else would come up, and I'd go through the same cycle all over again. Only after the third or fourth time did the thought occur to me that my life might always include some form of suffering.

You may have lost a parent or a child, been diagnosed with cancer, or been abused at some point in your life, and you might take exception with my use of the word *suffering* to describe my insignificant troubles. I don't blame you one bit. I just invite you to consider with me how your own suffering may be filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

This idea didn't make much sense at first, but I'm beginning to see why Paul was honored to partner with Jesus in filling up what remains of His

afflictions. Paul seemed to believe that God wanted Christ and His body, the church, to suffer for the sake of the gospel, and that through an appointed measure of suffering, God will reach the world with the good news that Jesus is worth every moment of hardship. Suffering for His sake seems to show that He is to be valued more than freedom from discomfort, that living by faith in the promise of eternity with God is worth far more than any cost in this world.

If we hear this and think of God as a merciless tyrant who finds pleasure in the pain of others, I bet Paul would tell us we've missed the point. He would probably say God is glorified when the world sees that Jesus is the believer's prized possession, that He is the best kind of gift and is worth so much more than any amount of loss, suffering, pain, or persecution.

My friend Billy learned this lesson while flat on his back in sub-Saharan Africa. He went on the same trip to Burkina Faso that Anna and I went on, and while he was there, he came down with malaria. He's a rock-solid man of God, the leader of our group at church, secretly nerdy in an engineering sort of way but immensely popular with the girls at church nonetheless, and a pretty outgoing and funny guy. But this sickness absolutely hammered him, reducing him to a nearly motionless state. After days of dehydration and weakness and pain, Billy wrote this while lying in bed:

I've learned a greater appreciation for the suffering of Christ on the cross. The pain I feel now is only a fraction of Christ's pain on the cross, and this is profound. Being sick in sub-Saharan Africa really starts to put things in perspective. I realize that the clothes I wear, the car I drive, and the computer I have all matter very little in comparison to this illness. Suffering exposes the trivial for what it is. Just think, people all around the world are sick, just like this, but all I care about is getting a cool-looking cell phone.¹³

Billy's encounter with suffering led him to a place of humility, the same place Job, the poster child for suffering, went when he replied to God, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know...therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."¹⁴ But God lifted Job out of his anguish and blessed him, and He did the same for Billy. Billy's last journal entry in Africa included this:

I've learned there is a reward for suffering.¹⁵ I cannot wait to get to heaven and have God reveal to me what has happened because of my suffering here. What if someone comes to the Lord because of this and I get to see them in heaven? That eternal reward will be sweet indeed, but there are already immediate rewards from the wisdom gained from God and the deepening of my faith. These are far more valuable than any other thing on earth.

It's hard to convey in a few short paragraphs what it's like to watch a guy fight for joy in the midst of illness. But it was inspiring to me. Billy's journal reminded me of the words of Paul: "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ."¹⁶

When I said God is glorified when the world sees that Jesus is the believer's prized possession, worth any amount of loss, this is what I was talking about. Billy began to see what Paul knew—the surpassing worth of knowing Christ, the conviction that He is so valuable that everything else in the world is like trash in comparison.

Imagine that—your wonderful family, your beautiful home, the good health you have, those meaningful friends, the wealth God has blessed you with, that perfect job—they're all like garbage. Don't get me wrong; God is a

God of blessing and good gifts, but those things are like trash when we compare them to the greater value of knowing Jesus.

This has been one of the things I've had to wrestle with. What constitutes a good gift? If you had asked me recently what good gifts God has given me, I would have rattled off a list like the one above. And they are good gifts. But a better gift, according to Paul, is to know Jesus. In fact, it's a surpassingly better gift, the kind of gift that fills your cup with joy.

And this is where my theology comes up short. God seems to be saying that suffering is a path to knowing Jesus in an increasingly intimate way. So if suffering takes me closer to the heart of Jesus, and Jesus is the best gift, then suffering must be a good gift too, right?

But this isn't a natural fit for my way of thinking. I am used to thinking of suffering as something negative, something to wrestle through. Sure, we can rely on God in the midst of it, but it's still a bummer. So when I read a verse that says, "For those who love God all things work together for good," I translate that into "all things work together for my happiness or my comfort."¹⁷ I struggle with accepting suffering as part of the "all things" God is working together for my good, even though "all things" must certainly mean *all* things, including suffering.

I wonder if you have the same struggle. Do you view suffering as a gift? Do you know the honor of suffering in order to fill up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions, to show the world Jesus is more valuable than all worldly treasures? Or are you like me, wanting more of God but really wanting more of the good things from God?

If we believe deeply in God's sovereignty, I don't think we have much choice but to trust that He knows better than we do what is best for our lives. If we trust Him but view suffering as a nuisance, we need to go to war with our understanding of good. We need a new definition of good,

a renewed confidence that having Jesus is good and that anything that takes us closer to Jesus is good as well.

If this is true, then my sore throat was a gift, and the pain in my legs was a gift, and my persecution at the ER was a gift, and Joseph's beatings were a gift, and all of your own trials, both great and small, have been gifts from God for your good. They are part of His good purposes and will, regardless of whether we recognize and embrace them.¹⁸

Do you want more of this kind of God? Is this the kind of God you can crave, the kind of God for whom you can hunger and thirst?

We need to keep in mind that He is *good* as we seek to fill up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions so the world will know that Jesus is more valuable to us than gold, or silver, or health, or comfort. I can understand why you might struggle with a God who gives both blessing and suffering as gifts. But we struggle with this because part of us believes that life now is more important than life later. Something in us wants to hold on to our comfort in life rather than our comfort in eternity.

Consider this: Your life is like "a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes," so the times of blessing are vapors too, as are the times of trial.¹⁹ Both vanish quickly, so neither should hold much sway over our lives. Believing that our lives are like vapors, that family and Air Hogs and sore throats and persecution are all vapors, allows us to join Paul and Billy in this affirmation:

Nothing, whether great or small, blessing or suffering, compares to knowing Jesus.