Subject: Suffering and God’s purpose  
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THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE SUFFERING

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. Proverbs 3:5-6

There are two kinds of people in the world—those who divide people into two groups and those who don’t, so said a pundit; yet there are times when what you have experienced in your life so separates you completely from those who have never been through what you have, that what you would say is meaningless to others. So you don’t even try to explain.

Those who really suffer are members of an exclusive fellowship, one forged through pain, through tears, and through heartache. What are mere words to group A are languages to group B, and none stand in line to enroll in the school of suffering.

When Paul wrote to fellow Christians in the Greek city of Philippi, he talked about “the fellowship of His suffering,” and how we drink to the bottom of that cup “being conformed to His death.”

Whoa, you may say. I’m more interesting in talking about health, happiness, life, and pleasure, asking, “Isn’t that what finding God’s purpose for my life is about?” One of the things that you don’t learn in a classroom is that part of God’s purpose for my life is to be enriched, purified, and changed into His image through—yes, as much as no one likes it—suffering, pain, hardship, and difficulty.

Long ago the Old Testament prophet spoke of the difficulties God’s people would go through, saying, “I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The Lord is our God’” (Zechariah 13:9).

Peter talks about faith that is refined by suffering which is of greater value than gold which has been refined by the fire (1 Peter 1:7). At the risk of having answered my own question, I’d like to ask if you know how most gold is produced.

An acquaintance of mine tells of taking a group of Intervarsity students to Africa where they visited one of the world’s highest-producing gold mines. Deep in the cavernous heart of the earth, miners would dig the earth and then process the dirt and then refine the ore, placing it in a vast, fiery furnace.

Then at the end of the tour, the guide took them into a room where sitting on a table was a gold bar. He then said, “If you can pick this up with one hand, it’s yours to keep. You can have it.” In the group was a football player, a husky, powerful young man who was immediately elected to take the challenge. People had gone to prison for taking gold, and all he had to do is pick it up and walk out with it, a rich man.

He gripped the bar of gold with all his might, his muscles tensed, the vein in his arms bulging from the exertion, but try as he might, he couldn’t move it.

When you come out of the furnace of suffering, refined and purified, what remains is more valuable than gold and cannot be moved. It is anchored to the Rock of Ages and more staunch than Gibraltar.

Amy Carmichael tells of visiting a goldsmith in an Indian village where the goldsmith would repeatedly put a small vessel containing gold over a fire, then remove it and take off the slag, and put it back over the fire.

“How do you know when it is finished?” a bystander asked the smith? “Ah,” he said, “when I see the reflection of my face in the ore, I know it is done.”

God’s purpose in times of difficulty is to refine us until the world sees His reflection in our lives. Think about it.

Resource reading: 1 Peter 3.