

MEFC Community Group Study Guide
For the Week of October 2nd - 8th

John Bunyan (1628-1688) is perhaps the most famous writer in the history of the world (outside the Bible). The author of The Pilgrim's Progress (the best-selling book on the planet - second to the Bible), was also a man acquainted with grief. As a Baptist preacher in England during the 17th century, he knew his share of sufferings. He spent 12 years in a Bedford prison cell because he refused not to preach when threatened by British authorities. Bunyan came to see these dozen years as an exquisite gift of God for it was during this period that he penned the manuscript to The Pilgrim's Progress (ca. 1675-1676). Later, Bunyan wrote a short book (published in 1684) titled: Seasonable Counsel: OR, Advice to Sufferers. The book is short (less than 100 pages - note the link to a free online version in the footnote below). In it, he simply seeks to unfold a single verse from 1 Peter 4:19 - "Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good." Bunyan had zero formal higher education. He completed the equivalent of fifth grade class work, yet his writing and wisdom on this topic and countless others is astonishing. Read the following "interview".¹ Discuss these things in your family and with your community group. Repent. Reform. Revive. And rejoice!

Q: John, thank you for stopping by to speak to us for a moment or two about this week's sermon topic. Tell us, why did you decide to write a book called *Seasonable Counsel: OR, Advice to Sufferers*?

A: "I thought it convenient, since many at this day are exposed to sufferings, to give my advice...This is the advice that, I thank God, I have taken myself..."²

Q: I'm not sure what vantage point you have from heaven, but just to fill you in - many Westerners today (sadly, even many Christ-followers today) have a very poor theology of suffering. Some folks seem to think it's never God's will for our lives. There's even a movement afoot today that preaches a 'health, wealth, and prosperity gospel'. Can you believe it?

A: "Why then should we think that our...lives will exempt us from sufferings, or that troubles shall do us such harm? For verily it is for our present and future good that our God doth send them upon us. I count therefore, that such things are necessary for the health of our souls, as bodily pains and labor are for the health of the body."³

Q: No doubt. That the Bible appears to teach such things is evident: 1 Peter 1:6-7; 4:12-19; Matthew 10:17; 1 John 3:13; 2 Corinthians 4:17. But I'm preaching to the choir. Those 12 years in the Bedford jail must have been formative for your theology of suffering, no?

¹ An audio version of this interview can be accessed at this link to the MEFC podcast featuring our own Guy Runkle as John Bunyan: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/practical-divinity-casuietry-soul-care-among-the-17th/id1505432503?i=1000542509810>.

² John Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, OR, Advice to Sufferers*. First Rate Publishers. <http://biblebb.com/files/bunyan/sufferers.htm> p. 3.

³ p.4

A: “I see that I still have need of these trials...”⁴

Q: That’s an awfully mature view of things. Expand on that for us...

A: “Shall we deserve correction? And be angry because we have it! Or shall it come to save us? And shall we be offended with the hand that brings it!...We are willing to pay for those potions that are given us for the health of our body, how sick soever they make us: and if God will have us pay too for that which is better for our souls, why should we grudge thereat?”⁵

Q: Okay, yikes. So this is what I’m talking about. Your maturity is extraordinary. J.I. Packer called you guys (the 17th century Puritans) the redwoods in the forest of theology. Your viewpoint on God’s designs in our sufferings make us 21st century evangelicals look like feeble and frail ferns scattered in your shadow. Keep talking. What else do we need to know about God’s sovereignty in our sufferings?

A: “...chastisements are a sign of sonship, a token of love: and the contrary a sign of bastardy, and a token of hatred (Hebrews 12:6-8; Hosea 4:14)...I am not for running myself into sufferings, but if godliness will expose me to them, the Lord make me more godly still: for I believe there is a world to come.”⁶

Q: Good point. Especially concerning the hope of heaven. The Apostle Paul tells us that “...this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:17-18). So suffering in this world prepares us for our eternal home in the next, doesn’t it?

A: “We should be overgrown with flesh, if we had not our seasonable winters. It is said that in some countries trees will grow, but will not bear fruit, because there is no winter there.”⁷

Q: This from a man who never experienced a Minnesota winter. Just kidding, John. I couldn’t resist. We’re already starting to feel that autumn bite in the air that signals the winter to come. Okay...so back on topic. You’re saying that rather than moan and complain about our so-called seasonal affective disorders, we should look at a freezing cold and cloudy February day and think to ourselves: “This is what suffering does in my life. It prunes my sinful growths just as autumn and winter shake leaves from the trees”. That’s really helpful, thanks. Well, we have to start wrapping up our conversation...any final thoughts about the sovereignty of God in our sufferings? How ought we to think as a church in order to grow in our convictions and competencies as it relates to counseling fellow sufferers?

A: “God has appointed WHO shall suffer...Philippians 1:29...1 Thessalonians 3:3...1 Peter 4:12... Revelation 6:11...God has appointed WHEN they shall suffer...Acts 18:9, 10...John 7:30...God has appointed...WHERE this, that, or the other good man shall suffer...Luke 9:30, 31; 13:33...God has appointed...WHAT KIND this or that saint shall undergo...Acts 9:16...John 21:19...Mark 19:13...

4 p.5 Okay, so while it’s true that he’s not experiencing any suffering *now* in glory, we ought to note well that Bunyan made this particular statement four years prior to his death - a solid five years *after* his release from prison!

5 p.5

6 p.5

7 p.7

Acts 13:29...Matthew 23:34...Doubtless our sufferings fall by the will of God unto us, God has appointed who, when, where, and the like, so he has, also, what manner of sufferings this or that good man shall undergo for his name. Let it then be concluded, that hitherto it appears, that the sufferings of saints are ordered and disposed by the will of God.”⁸

Q: That’s powerful. Thank you. Would you leave us with a benediction?

A: “God hath strewed all the way from the gate of hell, where thou wast, to the gate of heaven, whither thou art going, with flowers out of his own garden. Behold how the promises, invitations, calls, and encouragements, like lilies, lie round about thee! Take heed that thou dost not tread them under thy foot.”⁹

⁸ pp.50, 51, and 52

⁹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/to-live-upon-god-that-is-invisible> . Accessed 10/30/22.