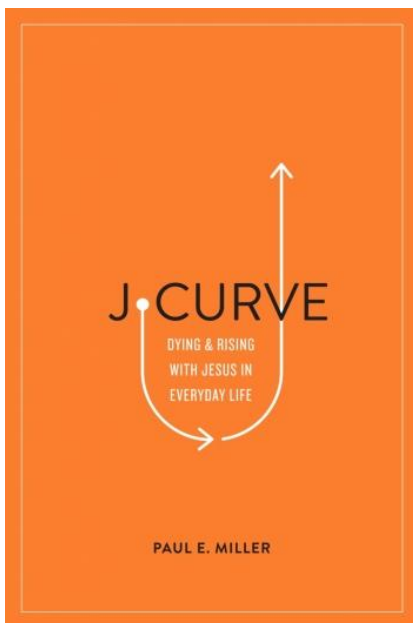


## Spiritual Formation in Suffering: An Introduction to the J-Curve



In Dialogue with Paul E. Miller's Book  
*J-Curve: Dying & Rising with Jesus in Everyday Life*  
accompanying the Sermon Series  
"When Life Hurts: The Story of Job"

## Spiritual Formation in Suffering: An Introduction to the J-Curve

The central question of the Christian life is this: *how do you become like Jesus?*

Most of us answer that question by pointing to two inter-connected ideas: *engaging in certain practices* (worship, prayer, Bible reading) and *adopting certain behaviors* (humility, generosity, purity, selflessness).

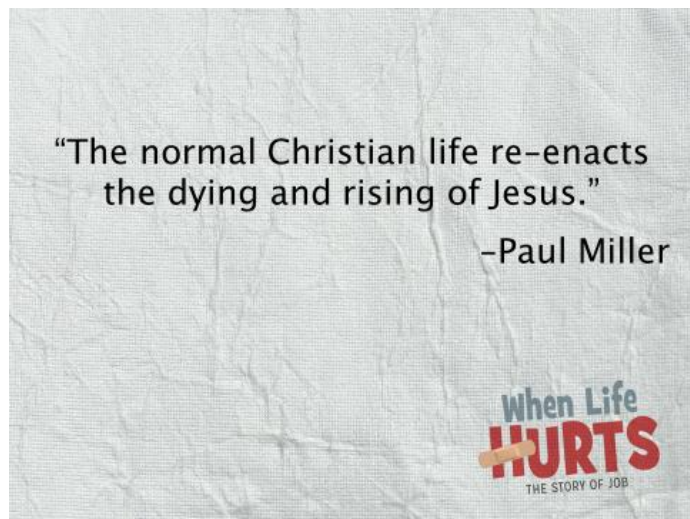
Yet, follow me for a second in a thought experiment: what if following Jesus and becoming like him not only involves engaging in certain practices but also involves a certain pathway? My oldest son is thinking about becoming a pilot one day. Now, there are certain practices he'll need to master (like landing) and certain pieces of knowledge he'll need to master (like instrument training) *but the practices and knowledge only come to fruition if he places his life on a certain pathway*. That is, the pathway towards becoming a pilot is indistinguishable from the practices and knowledge and behaviors he would learn.

What has this to do with becoming like Jesus? Many times, we think of Christlikeness in terms only of practices and behaviors (*do this or don't do this*) but fail to identify what a Christ-like **pathway** looks like in the Christian life. What is the pathway towards becoming like Jesus?

In this essay, I want to give you a general framework for understanding *how God forms the soul in the midst of suffering* and *how you walk on the path to becoming like Jesus*. *What does the road look like?*

To help us discover this pathway, Paul E. Miller communicates an idea that is spectacularly simple:

**"The normal Christian life re-enacts the dying and rising of Jesus."**

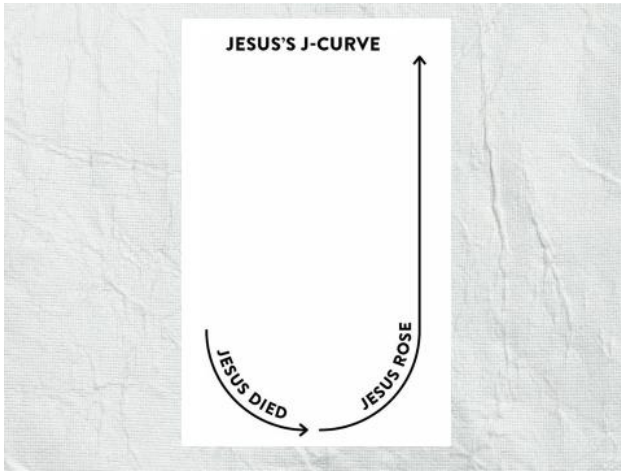


Simple. Profound. Yet, it's the pathway to becoming like Jesus.

This idea is a central in the life and teachings of Jesus. Jesus repeatedly explains the pathway to Christlikeness again and again: "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*" (Mark 8:34; see also Matthew 10:38; Matthew 16:24; Luke 9:23; Luke 14:27).

Jesus' life first went **down** into death, and then (and only then) **up** into resurrection. Paul Miller calls the shape of this path the J-Curve and argues that: **"The J-Curve is the shape of the normal Christian life."**

Christlikeness comes through the J-curve as our lives begin to mirror the life of Jesus. Christ invites us to follow him on the J-curve. Perhaps the "Job experience" is not an outlier in how God forms the soul.



The J-Curve is simple: *Jesus died. Jesus rose.* This is Jesus' J-Curve.

But in following Jesus: *We die. And we rise.* And this is **our life of faith**, our J-Curve.

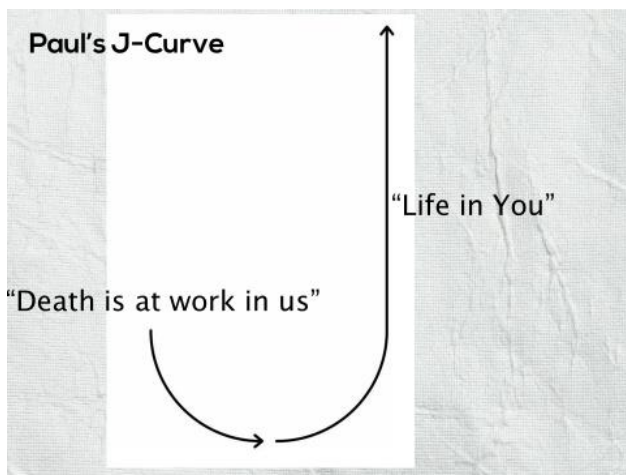
Notice an important truth of the J-Curve: the J-Curve entails a descent into suffering that ends in death before the rising and resurrection can occur. However, the good news is this: "Just like the earthly life of Jesus, the J ends higher than it starts."<sup>1</sup>

### The Apostle Paul's Example of a J-Curve

We see the J-Curve not only in the *life of Jesus* but also in the *life and ministry of the apostle Paul*. Paul in his life and ministry re-enacts the gospel. Paul re-enacts the dying and the rising with Jesus:

**2 Corinthians 4:7,11-12**  
*But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us...For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.*

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*So Jesus lives the J-curve. Paul lives the J-curve.* Guess what? If you want to become like Jesus, you are also invited into the J-Curve. This is the normal pathway in becoming like Christ. Joel Olsteen promises you "your best life now" but Jesus promises you a J-Curve. The J-Curve has a resurrection (Yes & Amen!) but it also has a cross.

*How do we become like Jesus? We are called by Jesus to re-enact the dying and rising with Jesus in our lives:*

**"The normal Christian life reenacts the dying and rising of Jesus."**

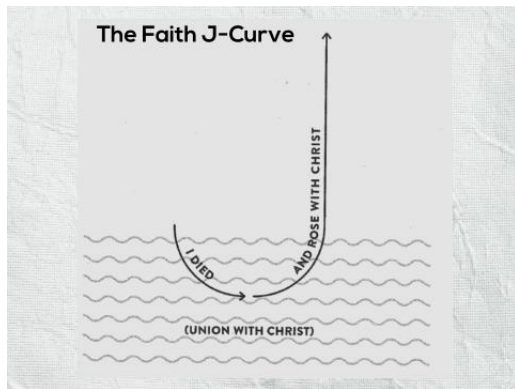
<sup>1</sup> Paul Miller, *J-Curve: Dying and Rising in Everyday Life*, 17.



Look at Romans 6:2b-4 where Paul talks about our “union with Christ” – a believer’s intimate union with Christ’s death and resurrection:

**Romans 6:2b-4**  
*How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized **into his death**? We were **buried** therefore **with him** by baptism **into death**, in order that, **just as Christ was raised** from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk **in newness of life.**”*

**When Life HURTS**  
 THE STORY OF JOB



Paul is saying: *you can't continue in sin – because you have died and risen with Jesus..* You have experienced the J-Curve of faith in your identification with Christ.

In the J-Curve, you experience **union** and **communion** with Christ! Christ is being formed deep in your soul.

**This is the path!** This is the journey! The Christian life is not just about certain practices and certain behaviors. The Christian life is also about a distinct path of dying and rising with Jesus. In fact, it's **in** the J-Curve that we are formed spiritually as a Christian.

### The Three Distinct Types of J-Curves

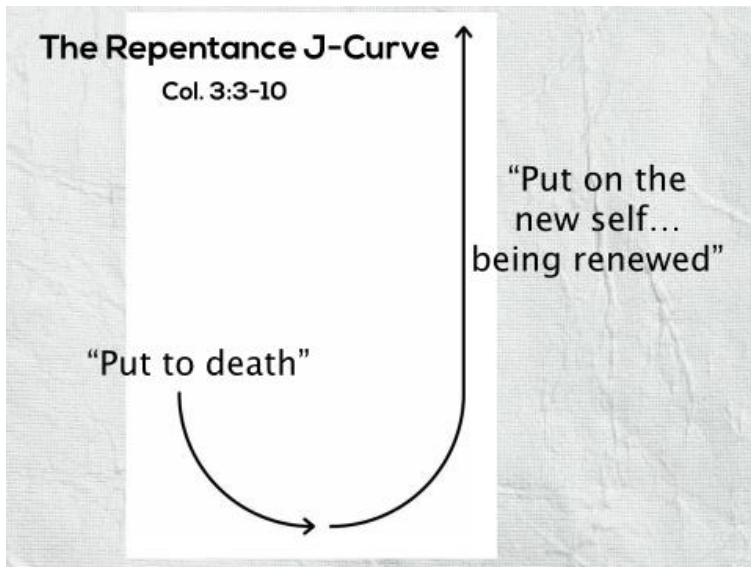
Yet, here's where it gets tricky. *There are actually three distinct and different types of J-CURVES.* (The problem with Job's friends is that they never realize what kind of J-Curve that Job is on.) As we experience and re-enact Jesus death and resurrection in our own lives, we can experience three distinct and different types of J-Curves (1) *The Repentance J-Curve*, (2) *the Suffering J-Curve* and (3) *the Love J-Curve*.

**Colossians 3:3-7**  
*For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death* therefore what is earthly in you: *sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them.*

(1) The Repentance J-Curve can be viewed biblically in Colossians 3:3-10.

The Repentance J-Curve is illustrated by the apostle Paul's admonition "Put to death" on the downward curve and "put on the new self which is being renewed" on the upward curve.

**Colossians 3:8-10**  
*But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.*



The important point is this: The Repentance J-Curve is necessary when sin and evil is **in you**. You are the problem. Your indwelling sin is causing the suffering. Thus, Paul refers to two distinct deaths in the Christian life: “You have died” (vs. 3 – in the past) and “put to death” (vs. 5 - in the present) which is the call to re-enact the cross in your own life.

Do you understand the implications?

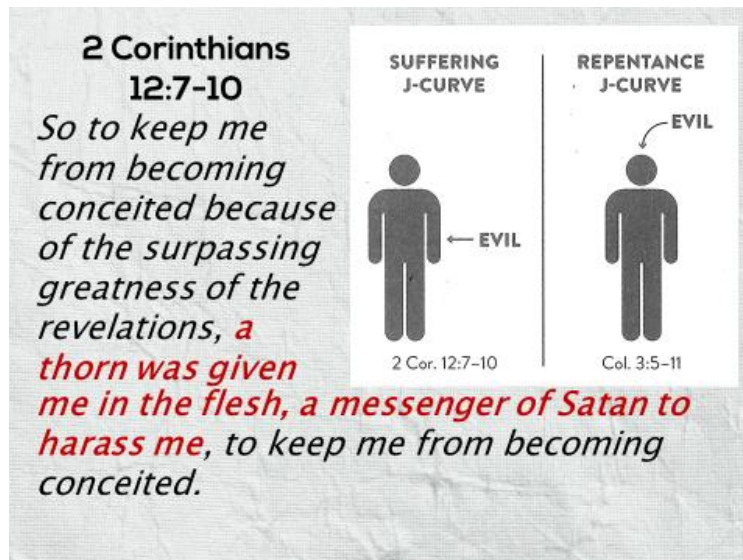
Paul is asking the Colossian Christians to re-enact the death of Jesus in their own lives by putting sin to death. By killing their sinful habits. By crucifying the flesh – the “old man”, the body of

sin. The normal Christian life is characterized by a J-Curve, a downward spiral of crucifying sin in your life. ***This is how you become like Christ.*** This is the path to Christlikeness -- you follow Christ on the J-CURVE by putting sin to death. This is the normal Christian life, the normal path to Christlikeness. ***And this is a path we should all be on every single day.***

Yet, considering the modern obsession with living a pain-free existence<sup>2</sup>, the Repentance J-Curve has fallen almost completely out of favor with modern Christians. This J-Curve feels like a death and feels like a failure – and it is! – which requires us to go to God or go to a loved one and say: “Lord, this is how I messed up. This is how I sinned against you. This is how I hurt you. I am so sorry. I want to put to death that sin in my life!”

### The Suffering J-Curve

If the repentance J-Curve is when evil is **in you**, the SUFFERING J-CURVE is when evil comes **upon you**. When evil comes to your doorstep, often unannounced and unasked for, you are on a suffering J-Curve.



<sup>2</sup> Paul Miller, *J-Curve*, see p. 91.

**2 Corinthians  
12:7-10**

*Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

**SUFFERING  
J-CURVE**



2 Cor. 12:7-10

**REPENTANCE  
J-CURVE**



Col. 3:5-11

**2 Corinthians  
12:7-10**

*Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For **when I am weak**, then **I am strong**.*

**SUFFERING  
J-CURVE**



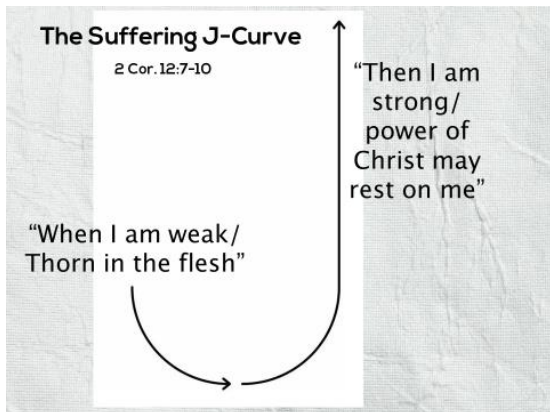
2 Cor. 12:7-10

**REPENTANCE  
J-CURVE**



Col. 3:5-11





2 Cor. 12:7-10 is a biblical example of a Suffering J-Curve.

**“When I am weak, then I am strong.”**

Paul rejoices in the “thorn in the flesh” so that the “power of Christ may rest on me”. This is the SUFFERING J-CURVE! Yet, when you read the apostle Paul you notice a great truth: Paul is a resurrection guy! He loves the resurrection. He glories in the resurrection. He lives in the power of the resurrection. Therefore, what does he do with suffering? He pleads with God to resurrect the suffering in his life – to take away his thorn in his flesh!

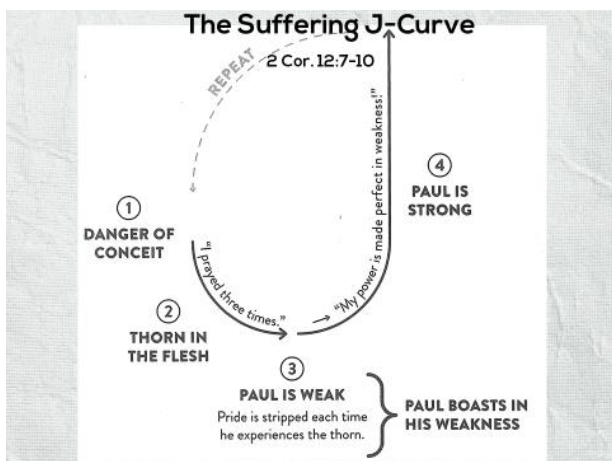
**“Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this that it should leave me.”**

Yet Jesus doesn’t answer the prayer. Why? It’s a big question for most of us! Yet in this case, Paul knows why: **“So to keep me from becoming conceited...a thorn was given to me in the flesh”**. Paul understands a profoundly significant truth: God is going to use evil outside of him (the thorn) in his life to deliver Paul from the evil inside of him (the conceit and pride in his heart).

Do you understand how wise and good and loving God is? God is going to use the suffering and evil that comes upon Paul’s life (the thorn in the flesh) to deal with the sin in Paul’s life (his conceit and pride).

Suffering and evil comes upon Paul’s life, God uses it in Paul’s life.

At the bottom of the J-Curve, pride is stripped away from Paul’s life. As Paul pleads with the Lord at the bottom of the J-Curve – God doesn’t offer him a solution, God gives Paul his grace. Paul Miller puts it like this: “As [Paul] cries out for the grace of God [in his suffering] he becomes like Jesus”<sup>3</sup>. This is the same Jesus who declared, “The Son can do nothing of his own accord” but only what he sees the Father doing (John 5:19). **The Son was fully dependent on the Father** -- fully dependent on his grace. And this is the person Paul is becoming! **The power of Christ rests on Paul as he recognizes his need for grace**. Jesus tells him, “My grace is sufficient!” Thus, Paul’s poverty of spirit and need for grace in his suffering becomes “the launching pad for the power of Jesus in his life, [as Paul] experiences a real time resurrection” in his own life.<sup>4</sup>



Here’s the truth about our spiritual formation in suffering. You could ask: What does God do in Paul’s suffering? *God purifies Paul from pride. And thus, Paul becomes more like Jesus.*

And the hard truth for me and you is this:

**We don’t like to live by grace.** We don’t like to live moment by moment fully dependent on the Father like Jesus did. (Jesus: “I can do nothing.” We don’t want to be *that* needy!) We don’t want to live humbled and so needy for grace. **We much prefer one-time miracles of grace than the 1,000**

**different J-CURVES that God places in our lives because he knows our flesh needs them.** God knows that our flesh and our sin requires a constant dying and rising with Jesus.

<sup>3</sup> See loose paraphrase Paul Miller, J-Curve, p. 102.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Miller, J-Curve, p. 102.

## The Love J-Curve

The third J-Curve is the Love J-Curve. Yet, unlike the suffering J-Curve which comes upon you from the outside, you initiate the J-Curve by deciding to love.

- In the REPENTANCE J-CURVE: *evil was in me.*
- In the SUFFERING J-CURVE, *evil is outside of me* but comes against me.

In the LOVE J-CURVE, evil and sin and suffering resides in another.

*Here's the big idea: choosing to love the other opens the door to suffering.*

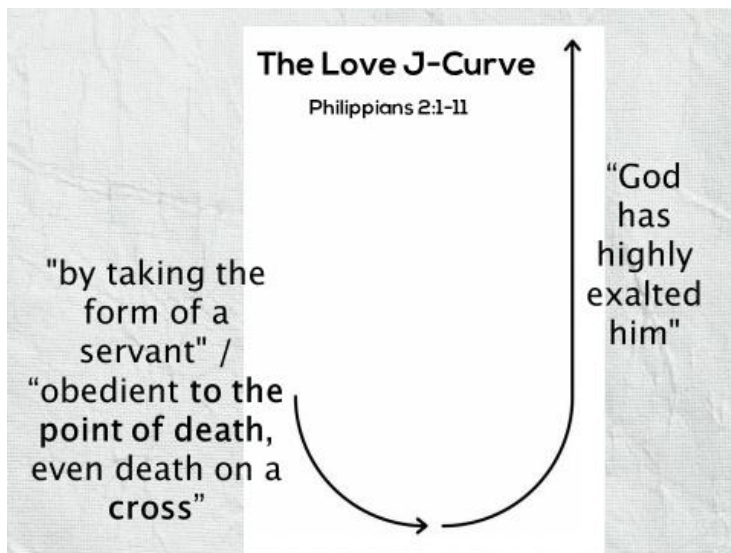
Paul Miller says it like this: "Typically we define love as the love we choose, not realizing that the love we choose almost always draws us into love we don't choose."

The J-Curve of love takes the shape of the incarnation. As Jesus came from heaven, he went lower and lower out of his love for sinners until his suffering increased until he was nailed on the cross. And the same pathway and movement happens to us. *The more that we walk the pathway of love, the more likelihood we will have the opportunity to practice suffering love:*

- The parent who loves a wayward child.
- The parent who loves a disabled child.
- The spouse who cares for their sick spouse.
- The spouse who cares for years & years for a spouse with dementia.

**Anytime you choose to love another, you have an opportunity to enter into the LOVE J-CURVE!**

The Love J-Curve is illustrated biblically by the apostle Paul in Philippians 2:1-11:



So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, <sup>2</sup> complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but **in humility count others more significant than yourselves.** <sup>4</sup> Let each of you **look not only to his own interests**, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but **emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant,** <sup>8</sup> being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in human form, he **humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even**

**death on a cross.**

[Do you see the downward, suffering, incarnational trajectory of the LOVE J-CURVE? Christ embodied it! Parents who love a wayward child show it! The sin is in the child and you still love the child. *The husband or wife who is sinned against can rebel, can complain, can nag, can shout...or they can humble themselves and incarnate love and take the path of the J-Curve of love in the midst of the suffering of being sinned against....* "Father, crucify me as I love that I might be like Christ."]



Therefore *God has highly exalted him* and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:1-11)

The J-Curve a general framework of spiritual formation in the midst of suffering. Let me leave you with two final points about J-Curves:

### **1. You're always on a J-CURVE. (Say it with me: "I'm always on a J-Curve".)**

In every season, you should be on the **Repentance J-CURVE**. Putting sin to death. Crucifying the flesh. *So that you might become like Jesus.*

In some seasons, you are in a **Suffering J-Curve**. Yet even in the suffering J-Curve, God is working on you to purify you and sanctify you. *Because Paul was becoming conceited...* God put him on the suffering J-CURVE.

In many seasons, you are invited into the **LOVE J-CURVE**. The sin is not only (and exclusively) **in you**, the sin is not only coming to your doorstep. **The sin or suffering is in another you are called to love.** And you are called to humble yourself and crucify yourself for the sake of love:

It's called a friendship. It's called being a parent. It's called being a spouse. It's called being called to love the local church that is never going to be perfect. Surrender the dream for an ideal marriage, the ideal church, the ideal parent, the ideal child and begin to love the child, the spouse, and the church that God has placed in your life.

**You're always on a J-Curve.** Which J-Curve are you presently on? It's helpful to know which one God is calling you to.

### **2. God enlarges the soul through J-CURVES. And God enlarges the soul through the INTERPLAY of the three J-Curves.**

The book of Job makes it very clear that Job is on the **SUFFERING J-CURVE**. In Job 6-7, Job speaks with these words:

- "Oh that my vexation were weighted and all my calamity laid in the balances!...It would be heavier than the sand of the sea!"
- "The arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison."
- "That it would please God to crush me: that he would let loose his hand and cut me off."
- "I am allotted months of emptiness."
- I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul."

Job is on the **Suffering J-Curve**. Yet his friends think he should be on the **Repentance J-Curve**.

His friends are wrong to try to put the blameless Job on the **Repentance J-Curve**.

Yet, do you know *who* can put Job on the **repentance J-curve**? **YAHWEH!**

Part of the purpose of Job's suffering is what Francis Anderson calls "an enlarged life with God". Job increases his capacity to know and follow Yahweh; spiritual formation happens to Job in the crucible of suffering.

When God appears to Job in the whirlwind, Job says:

"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6). *His Suffering J-Curve leads to a Repentance J-Curve.*

And Yahweh also invites Job to walk the path of the Love J-Curve.

God essentially tells Job: "Pray for your friends....while you're still in the midst of your suffering!"

Maybe in the back of Job's mind he's thinking: "These guys? These jokers? These "friends" who have tormented me with their words? Why should I love them? When I am the one suffering?"

And the answer is this: "*Because on the Love J-Curve, oh Job, you become more like God in his suffering love for you.*"

When I first got to Africa, I was on a Suffering J-Curve:

- Wife: postpartum depression.
- Son Kenyon 18 mo. old: 6 months of malaria.

I recognized that I was in the midst of a Suffering J-Curve: "God, can't you do something about all this!" Yet, in the midst of my suffering, I eventually recognize there are things in my life that need deep repentance. So, I eventually approach my wife in this way:

"Lisa, can you forgive me for the pressure I've put on you in this marriage? I've wanted a good marriage more than I've wanted to love you."

*The suffering J-Curve led to a Repentance J-Curve.*

*But the Suffering J-Curve also led to a LOVE J-Curve:*

I remember saying to Lisa in the midst of all this suffering of depression & sickness and frustration: "Lisa, *even if* you have another depression, I'm going to be right here." You see, I had refused to descend into love; I wanted the resurrection! I wanted the healing! I wanted the victory! I wanted to get out of the suffering – for her and for me! Yet what did God want? **God wanted me to descend into the J-CURVE where I could be transformed (perhaps just a bit) into love.**

Job experienced an "enlarged life with God" because he experienced the suffering J-curve, the repentance J-Curve and the Love-J Curve all together in his story and in his life.

Welcome to the Book of Job.