

**Core Seminar**

**Suffering for the Glory of God**

**Class 2: God’s Revealed Purposes for Suffering**

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***How God can use suffering for our good and His glory***

1. **Introduction**

This morning, we’ll be looking at the purposes that God has revealed for suffering.

And so, this could be a very dangerous class. If we’re not careful, you could walk out in forty-five minutes quite damaged spiritually. Let me explain:

This class is dangerous because . . . well, when I suggest that God has revealed purposes for our suffering, you could easily think that you should *always* understand God’s purposes for your suffering. That’s the first way this class could be dangerous. Just think for a moment how often you’ve heard someone in a difficult trial say something like, *“I just don’t understand why God would let this happen to me.”* Now, sometimes that’s a cry of faith—of trusting bewilderment at God’s purposes. But quite often, it’s more an accusation against God, suggesting that if he was the God described in the Bible, we wouldn’t be hurting like we are. That unless we can understand *why*, we don’t deserve to suffer.

But as you’ll recall from last week, the main thrust of the Bible’s dealing with suffering is *not* a call to understand, but a call to trust. So we’re taught who God is—and on the basis of that evidence we’re called to trust in the midst of trial.

We’re told in **Isaiah 55:8-9,**

**“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”**

And this God, who’s thoughts are higher than our, also never changes. We read in **Heb. 13:8**, **“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”** So, our comfort shouldn’t be the degree to which we can *understand* God’s purposes, but the degree to which we can *trust* our Savior.

That’s the first way in which this class might be dangerous. We might think we have a right to understand God’s purposes for our suffering.

But there’s a second way this class might be dangerous. Let’s pretend for a moment that I’m able to explain God’s purposes not just in general, and not just for some of life’s challenges, but for *all* suffering. Let’s say that you walked away from this class with an encyclopedic knowledge of why God allows pain in your life. What then? Would you have to exercise faith in the midst of suffering? No. You may get fired from your job, but, keep pretending with me, you could think *“God is allowing this to happen because in a moment I’m going to have a conversation with Sue, who didn’t get fired, and she’s going to see how little this has rattled me, and she’s going to ask me why, and I’m going to share the gospel, and then she’s going to go back to her sister-in-law who’s been sharing the gospel with her and ask some more questions, and God’s going to use that to lead her to faith even though I’ll never see Sue again until heaven.”*

And it all makes sense. So, would you have to exercise faith in the midst of suffering? No, exit faith.

But we know faith is important, as **Hebrews 11:6** says, **“..without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”**

So, the second danger is that we need to see God’s purposes for suffering as revealed in his word not as a substitute for faith, but as evidence for faith. We don’t want to see Scripture as a body of knowledge to be used to hypothesize God’s purposes for a particular trial—i.e. we study until we’re pretty sure why he let it happen so we can be OK with it. Instead, we should see it as a series of categories helping me understand *in general* why God allows suffering that then help me trust his unknown purposes for *my particular* suffering.

So, we use these purposes for suffering not as explanation, but as evidence to help us trust God.

And there’s one last danger in this class. Normally, it’s really **un**helpful to tell people why they’re suffering. In the midst of tragedy, be very careful before you ask “*What do you think God is teaching you in this*?” (which could trivialize pain and turns their suffering into a solvable riddle). Be very careful before you say, “*I understand what you’re going through*” (which of course you don’t – every situation has unique complexities). Sometimes, a simple question of how to pray and a hug are the best ways to support our suffering friends.

So, with that in mind, we’ll begin the rest of our time by considering the astonishing claim the Bible makes that suffering is a *gift*—and then look at eight different purposes that God, in His wisdom, has given us for suffering.

1. **Suffering as a Gift. … or … Suffering is a Gift!?**

We understand from **Ephesians 2:8** that we have been *granted* *faith*—*gifted faith,* *by grace,* to trust in Christ. We understand that at one point we were dead in our sins, hostile to God and refusing to seek after Him[[1]](#footnote-1); but then we were granted, gifted with faith. But then in **Philippians 1:29** we read about another gifting. Paul writes, **“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...”** Seriously? *Granted* to *suffer* for Him? Why in the world would Paul consider suffering for the sake of Christ to be a gift—much less a gift on the same level as our faith?

Well, a good place to start in understanding this is Jesus’ own promise that we would suffer. **Luke 9:23. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”**

For a first century audience, to take up your cross wouldn’t mean bearing up with an annoying roommate or a stubbed toe or a fussy child. It would mean you’re on your way to die. When a Christian takes up their cross, they have come to an end of themselves (no matter how costly it might be) in order to follow Jesus. But that’s the key. We suffer, we sacrifice, *in order to follow Jesus*. Continue on in **Luke 9. “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?” (9:24-25).**  Christianity is *not* ascetic—we never, ever, ever suffer for the sake of suffering, or sacrifice as an end in itself. We always give up in order to take hold of what is better.

We suffer to take hold of something better. That’s why suffering is a gift. But what is it that we take hold of? That brings us to God’s purposes in suffering. I’ll give you eight. Your job? Listen to all eight and pick one or two where, as you consider your own attitude toward suffering, you think you need a better understanding of that category of God’ purposes.

QUESTIONS?

1. **God’s revealed purposes**
   1. ***To grow us in holiness***

David writes in **Psalm 119:67, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word.”** God in His kindness will sometimes use suffering to get our attention and wake us up to sin’s deception in our lives. We know that for the Christian, suffering is never God’s condemnation for we trust that, **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,” Romans 8:1**. But suffering can be God’s blessing to wake us up. *“Pain,”* as C.S. Lewis describes it, *“insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.[[2]](#footnote-2)”*

* 1. ***To build perseverance (endurance)***

The Christian life is a race that calls for perseverance; it calls for endurance **(Heb. 12:1).** We are responsible to **“continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel…”** (**Col. 1:23a**), and we can only do that by the preserving grace of God[[3]](#footnote-3). Now how does God give us grace to endure? We know that God will never allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear. **(1 Cor 10:13).** But have you ever considered that the normal way he does that, the normal way he gives us grace to bear up under temptation is not to send some mystical strength in the moment, but to *strengthen* us *through* prior trials. In **Romans 5:3**, Paul reminds us, **“We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance…”**

So that temptation you’ll experience a year from now? Maybe the difficulty you’re suffering through today is how God will persevere you through that future trial. We need endurance to finish the race, and trial is a main way that God grows our endurance.

* 1. ***To grow us in maturity***

When we turn to James, we find the same idea of perseverance as we did in Romans: **“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”** (**Jas. 1:2-3**). But steadfastness (perseverance and endurance) isn’t an end in itself; he goes on to write, **“And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”** (**Jas. 1:4**).

Over time, experiencing the sufficiency of God’s preserving grace leads to hope - not in ourselves, but in God. **“Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame…”** (**Rom. 5:3b-4**). We will, as Paul instructs, increasingly *know* what it means to **“be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.”** (**Eph. 6:10**). And in His mighty power, we lack nothing!

Do you desire to be useful to God? Do you hunger for the strength of faith? Do you want to be rooted and sound in your Christian walk? These things happen as we understand God’s word. Now, we all know the difference between knowing something in our heads and really acting on it in our hearts. So often, it seems, the thing that takes head knowledge of God’s word and fuses it into our hearts—that makes it instinctual—is adversity. Through adversity we see God’s promises tested—and prevail. *We* experience *his* faithfulness. Adversity seems to be one of God’s primary tools for developing maturity.

* 1. ***To teach us His word***

David writes in Psalm 119, **“It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.”** (**Ps. 119:71**). Isn’t that incredible! Suffering is one way that we come to understand the Bible. Why is that? Sometimes it’s because suffering is what softens our hearts so that we *don’t just hear, but listen*. As Richard Baxter put it, *“Suffering so unbolts the door of the heart, that the Word hath easier entrance.[[4]](#footnote-4)”* It’s one thing to *read* about God’s comfort; quite another to experience it. God in His kindness often uses difficulties in our lives to teach us his Word. Now of course that assumes that we don’t miss what he’s teaching us. So, it’s no surprise that James follows his amazing exhortation in **James 1:2** to, **“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,”** with an encouragement to ask God for wisdom **“…who gives generously to all without reproach.”** And if we ask, the promise is that our generous God will give it. So times of trial teach us God’s word; we should ask Him for the wisdom to not miss what He is teaching.

* 1. ***To help us encourage others***

**2 Corinthians 1:3-4** says, **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God**.”

Isn’t that amazing. Why does God comfort us? So that we can comfort others. Suffering might make a promise in Scripture come alive, which we can share with others **(Rom. 15:4).** It might give us a more empathetic heart. We might encourage others by our own experience of suffering, reminding them that they’re not alone **(1 Pet. 5:9).**

And did you notice that word **“any”** in **2 Corinthians 1:4**? “**so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction…**” We shouldn’t be reluctant to comfort others from our experience even when their tragedy seems far greater than ours.

* 1. ***To wean us off self-reliance***

**2 Corinthians 1:8b-9** says, **“For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.”**

We all need that, don’t we? To **“rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.”** I don’t particularly enjoy those dark nights of the soul. I’m sure you don’t either. But God can use them to drive us out of ourselves and into the love of God. John Piper writes, *“I have never heard anyone say, ‘The really deep lessons of life have come through times of ease and comfort.’ But I have heard strong saints say, ‘Every significant advance I have ever made in grasping the depths of God’s love and growing deep with Him, has come through suffering.[[5]](#footnote-5)’”*

Isn’t it interesting, then, what so often happens. Suffering is uncomfortable because we’re out of control, often burdened beyond our strength. We want to get to the other side as fast as possible so that we can be comfortable again. Translation—suffering forces us to walk by *faith* and that’s really uncomfortable because what we really prefer is walking by *sight*.

And so we end up trying to flee the very thing God is doing in our suffering. So in trial, remind yourself that this is a time to lean on God—and that is a good thing.

* 1. ***To strengthen our assurance***

This purpose may sound odd at first since our inclination may be to think that suffering would threaten our confidence in Christ. But think of what the writer of **Hebrews** says: **“It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.”** (**Heb. 12:7-8**)

A mark of true conversion is not that we’ve “prayed the prayer” or “walked the aisle” but that we endure (Col. 1:23). A person may profess to be a Christian because it was culturally acceptable, a way to meet new friends, pleasing to the parents – yet never be truly converted. Yet suffering tests the genuineness of our faith. It gives evidence of whether our faith is real or self-serving. **1 Peter 1:6-7 “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious that gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”**

* 1. ***To glorify God***

How is God glorified in our suffering? When all the apparent ‘perks’ of following Christ are gone and all that remains is the promise of persecution, and still the Christian *abides in* Christ, *then* God is glorified. We choose him because he’s worth more than what we give up. And that brings him glory.

Moses understood this: **“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.”** (**Heb. 11:24-26**) Moses made the economically rational decision to choose the thing of bigger value. He chose the LORD, not the treasures of Egypt. And that showed how much God was worth.

That’s why Peter reminds us that we need to always be **“…prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you…”** (**1 Pet. 3:15**). Peter was writing to readers who were suffering and knew that when the world watches someone suffer *yet still have hope*, there’s gonna be questions! The only answer is that our hope is not ultimately in what this world has to offer, but in God. He is our reward **(Heb. 11:6)**; He is our inheritance **(1 Pet. 1:3-4).** He is worth so much more than what the world values.

**"Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."** (**Psalm 73:25-26**)

1. **Optional Member Testimony**
2. **Conclusion: *Two Thoughts***

Even though the Bible’s answer to suffering is primarily one of faith rather than understanding, the Bible still gives us many, many examples of how God works good through suffering. I don’t know about you, but as I’ve gone through this list—and as I turn from one purpose to the next to the next—knowing that these eight are just the beginning, I’m quite overwhelmed at God’s mercy in turning our suffering to good.

So how do we use a class like this? What is the purpose of knowing God’s purpose, so to speak? Two final thoughts for you.

* 1. **Avoid the danger of *needing to know.***

First, remember that our lack of understanding is in *no* way a reason *not* to trust. Proverbs says, **"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and *do not lean on your own understanding*. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths"** (**Proverbs 3:5-6**). We can trust God because He has revealed *who* He is, not because He explains every detail of what He is doing. So use these purposes for suffering as a reason to trust, not as a substitute for trusting. God’s revealed purposes for suffering help us recognize the good he has worked through past suffering—which helps us trust him in the future. And while we may not be able to look at present difficulty and identify God’s purposes, the sheer volume and specificity of these categories certainly help us trust that, even if we are blind to it, God is using this for our good.

* 1. **Praise God for the mercy of revelation**

And a second way to use this class: turn it into praise. Isn’t it amazing how much God has told us about how he uses suffering? He understands our weakness, and he has lavished his mercy on us through his word to help us trust when times are hard. Isn’t his ability to turn the very worst into the very best amazing? The trap of the Red Sea into an eternal monument to his power. The tragedy of Naomi into the blessing of King David. The crucifixion of the only innocent man who ever lived into our eternal salvation. Praise God for all that we’ve seen today.

QUESTIONS?

1. Eph. 2:1; Rom. 8:7, 3:11 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Problem of Pain* by C.S. Lewis, pg. 91 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Phi. 1:6; Jn. 10:28; Rom. 8:29-30 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Richard Baxter, “The Cure of Melancholy and Overmuch Sorrow, by Faith.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Desiring God* by John Piper, pg. 222 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)