

**Core Seminar**

**Suffering for the Glory of God**

**Class 3: The Future of Suffering**

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***The importance of heaven and hell to the suffering Christian***

This morning we continue our study of how we, as those who have put their faith and trust in Jesus, can suffer well—to the glory of God. In week 1 we thought about how trials, burdens and sufferings of all kinds are real in this fallen world. We admitted that all of us, at times, feel the tension between our experience and its apparent conflict with God’s character as claimed in the Bible. We were reminded that we can plead with God, as the Psalmist does, through our tears and “whys” without losing faith; but it is a challenge!

In week 2 we dove in and looked at God’s revealed purposes for suffering:

1. To grow us in holiness
2. To build perseverance
3. To grow us in maturity
4. To teach us his word
5. To help us encourage others
6. To wean us off self-reliance
7. To strengthen our assurance
8. To glorify God

Reminding ourselves of those 8 points can be extremely helpful through various trials. They help put flesh on what seems to be so pointless most of the time. We can use those purposes not as an explanation, but as evidence to help us trust in God. Today we are going to think about how the reality of both heaven and hell should constantly reinforce our faith as we endure trials of all kinds. That may sound strange at first. Sure, heaven is a wonderful thought but how can thinking about hell help us in suffering? Well, we are going to talk about that, and I pray that by the end of today’s class you see how it is that we can build our faith on such truth. And because suffering is a fight for faith, we will be better equipped to endure and bring glory to God.

1. **Introduction**

Initially I would ask what difference it makes that you know the end of something? A sporting event you recorded to watch later, a book you’re tempted to skim the last chapter when you are only in the middle, a movie you haven’t seen and are desperately trying to protect yourself from on-line reviews or reports from friends as “spoiler alerts” are everywhere…? Knowing the end makes a difference and the same is true for the Christian life. God in His kindness has told us how it all ends. He wins. Satan, sin and death itself are defeated and we, as Christians, know that there is no future for suffering.

To suffer as a Christian means to suffer with the end of all things firmly fixed in your view. If you don’t, eventually whatever hope you have, will fail and you will be crushed under the weight of reality in this fallen world[[1]](#footnote-1). But when we suffer with the End in mind, our hope burns brightly because it shows that what we get far surpasses anything we give up or have to endure. And in that hope there is glory to God and joy for us, even in the midst of suffering.

Any answer to the problem of suffering that does not reflect on its cause, its cure, and its end, cannot be called a Christian one. Now with busy schedules, deadlines, and other responsibilities that call for our attention, it is easy to live as if this life is all there is. Think about it—if we really believe that true life, fullness of joy, and the end of pain are found in eternity in God’s presence then why do we cling so hard to this life. We may believe that there is life after death, but we often push it to the backburner until the idea of eternity becomes more of an insurance policy just in case[[2]](#footnote-2). When we lose sight of heaven, tragedy (big or small) can leave us in despair because it robs us of hope.

Martin Luther understood this reality well and said that he lived as if there were only two days on his calendar: *“this day”* and *“that day”.* *“This day”* referring to today, the one you find yourself in; *“that day”* referring to the end, the day when we will stand before God as Judge. So, what we’ll do is begin by looking at the end and consider what God is doing with the realities of hell and heaven. With *“That Day”* in mind, we can move back to *“This Day”,* today, and see how those realities help us as we suffer.

1. ***“That Day” and Hell***

So, let’s consider what the Bible says about Hell…

When the Bible speaks of hell, it describes it as place with suffering so unbearable it will be filled with **“weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12).** It’s described as a **“fiery furnace”,** **“the unquenchable fire”** where **“their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (Matt. 13:42, Mk. 9:43, 48)**. Imagine that, **“unquenchable fire”…** Those in hell long for an end, but there is no end in sight. Scripture describes it as a place of eternal, conscious punishment for the wicked where sins are punished, not for 10 years or 100 years, or 1,000 years, but forever. That’s why **Revelation 14:10-11** speaks of those who rebel to the end as **“drink[ing] the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger…he will be tormented…forever and ever…[with]…no rest, day or night…”**

Yet the most terrifying aspect of all is the complete separation from God—of being at odds with Him, of facing His wrath, of knowing you will never be able to be reconciled to the God who you were created to worship **(2 Thes. 1:9).** And where there is separation from God, there is also separation from our friends, family, and loved ones. Whatever this generation tries to tell us, Hell is *not* a party where people will be reunited. Those in hell will forever be at odds with each other, constantly in anguish by the realization of their guilt and shame.

So, we have to ask, “What does this tell us about God?” What’s he doing?

Can you imagine if God looked at the evil in this world—murder, theft, abuse, discrimination, betrayal…, and did nothing about it, even called evil good? That would not be a God who is good, that would be an evil tyrant. But God is not indifferent toward sin, and Hell serves as evidence. Because he is *good* and *just*, He will punish every sin. As God revealed in **Exodus 34:7**, He will **“by no means clear the guilty”.** *Nothing* will be swept under the carpet, He will never be the wicked Judge who takes a bribe, shows partiality, or gets the verdict wrong.

Okay, if that’s what God is doing on “*That Day”*, what difference does it make for us for how we live *“This Day”—"Today”*? What difference does it make for us in the midst of suffering?

1. ***“This Day” and Hell***

Imagine someone who has been sinned against—someone has done them wrong. Maybe they’ve been cut off in traffic. Maybe their spouse blamed them for something they didn’t do. Maybe someone robbed them. Maybe they’ve been abused by someone they trusted. Maybe they’ve been cut off by a spouse or child because they professed to be a Christian.

In any of these scenarios (and you can imagine countless others), what does the victim long for? *Justice!* And that longing is good and right, it’s an expression of being made in the image of God. The problem is that the desire for justice can very quickly give way to the desire for vengeance; and vengeance was never meant to be a burden we were designed to carry, it’s too heavy. When you live as if vengeance is up to you, the desire for justice can consume you. You can’t forgive the person because if you do, he might get away with it! And so, anger and resentment start to grow inside until you are left bitter.

To those who find themselves suffering under this burden, God mercifully comes along and offers to take it off their shoulders and carry it *for* them. We read in **Romans 12:17-19**, **“Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’”**

It is God’s to avenge, not ours **(ref. Deut 32:43, 1 Sam 24:12, Ps 99:8-9).** We can trust God to make right every wrong, to provide justice in every situation. Those who have wronged you will answer to God for it and they *won’t* get away with it. One day, on “*That Day”*, they will stand before God and answer to Him. If in this life they refused to repent, they will drink the cup of God’s wrath.

So, when we see the Biblical picture of hell it should more than satisfy our inward sense of a need for justice—In God’s universe, in his economy, all is ultimately “fair”. We can trust God. More than that, we can let go of the bitterness, the anger, and resentment. Instead of being overcome by evil we can now overcome evil by doing good to that person. When I see Hell for what it is, I don’t want to wish that on my worst enemy. Understanding Hell can help us forgive others freely.

Taking this thought one more step—because we know that Christ bore God’s full wrath for the sins of those who would put their faith in him, God can be absolutely just and still forgive sinners. He can, as Paul writes in **Romans 3,** be just and be the one who *justifies*. How does that work? When a person refuses to repent of their sin and trust in Christ, they face God’s wrath on their own, that’s how vengeance comes, and God’s justice is preserved. But if that person repents and trusts in Christ, God’s vengeance, his punishment, comes a different way, as an atoning sacrifice—He substitutes Himself in the place of those who trust in Him. Either way, God remains just because sin is paid for by Christ on the cross or it’s paid for, individually, at the final judgement (repeat).

In that sense, the reality of hell has another purpose in our suffering. When we are wronged, we long for justice. But, when we are guilty of the wrong, what do we long for? *Mercy.* Hell isn’t just what *other* people deserve (the Hitlers, Stalins, Bin Ladens); it is what *we* deserve. “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God…for *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God…we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.[[3]](#footnote-3)” As a result, what is *fair,* what is *just*, is for us to be cast into hell.

If Hell is not real, we’ve not been saved from much. But if it is real, Hell serves as a backdrop to show the depth of God’s mercy, to show us what we’ve been saved *from*!

In the midst of suffering, it’s easy to feel sorry for ourselves and think God *owes* us His kindness; to forget what I *deserve* because of my sin. And when we become ungrateful, suffering becomes unbearable. But, the more we appreciate God’s mercy, the more we’re able to get our focus off of self and take the long-view of things. In that sense, even when I don’t understand everything God is doing, I can rest in the truth that God is good and is working all things out, and that hope is what gets us through and motivates us for righteous living.

QUESTIONS?

1. ***“That day” and Heaven***

On “*That Day”*, the Day of Judgment, Jesus will **“…separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,” (Matthew 25:32)** the righteous from the unrighteous. So, we need to consider not only what the Bible says about Hell, but what it says about heaven.

When the Bible speaks of heaven, it describes it as a place where there is no more suffering. Thus we read in **Revelation 21**, **““Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”** No longer will there be headaches, cancer, arms that don’t work, sore joints, eyes that don’t see. There will be no more sadness, no more pain, no more funerals. We will be given new bodies that never break down, never wear out, never get sick.

There will be no more sin to fight[[4]](#footnote-4); no more guilt and shame from broken pasts. We will be those who have trusted in Christ and our relationships will be without envy, rivalry, or competition. Instead there will be perfect love – each person caring for the other, able to trust completely.

And best of all, heaven is described as the place where we will dwell with God and be perfectly happy, satisfied in Him. It is impossible to put to words how wonderful this will be. Picture the *best* pleasure you can imagine in life…God, is infinitely better. Every good in this life is a sign post to the ultimate good of God Himself. He is what is amazing about heaven. If heaven was just about avoiding hell, just about singing songs and sitting on a cloud, all those comforts would eventually become boring. But we will never plumb the depths of the beauty, majesty, wonder of who God is. He will take our breath away again, and again, and again….

So, what does heaven teach us about God? What is He up to?

Well if Hell shows us the goodness and justice of God, heaven shows us the grace and mercy of God. Heaven is *not* what any of us deserve but it is real, and it is enjoyment beyond our imagination. So, if this is true about God, what difference does it make for us in the midst of suffering? How should it affect how we live in “*This Day”,* Today?

1. ***“This Day” and Heaven***

For one, it reminds us there is an end of suffering—it will not go on forever. William Cowper penned in the poem, “The Path of Sorrow” that, *“The path of sorrow, and that path alone. Leads to the land where sorrow is unknown*.”

Without such hope, suffering will crush us with despair. Think about the suffering we endure just because of our bodies. Ever since sin entered the picture our bodies have groaned under the weight of aging – breaking down, getting sick. But the hope we have is that these bodies are only temporary—in the new heavens and new earth, our bodies will be made new. In **Philippians 3:20-21**: **“But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.”**

Joni Eareckson Tada who has suffered as a quadriplegic since 1967 explains how crucial this hope has been for her in her suffering. She writes:

*“I still can hardly believe it. I, with shriveled, bent fingers, atrophied muscles, gnarled knees, and no feeling from the shoulders down, will one day have a new body, light, bright, and clothed in righteousness – powerful and dazzling. Can you imagine the hope this gives some spinal cord-injured like me? Or someone who is cerebral palsied, brain-injured, or who has multiple sclerosis? Imagine the hope this gives someone who is manic-depressive. No other religion, no other philosophy promises new bodies, hearts, and minds. Only in the Gospel of Christ do hurting people find such incredible hope.[[5]](#footnote-5)”*

Those suffering physically need hope – and the hope of *heaven* is that our bodies will be made new. One thing this points to is that our God cares deeply about our pain and suffering. David writes in **Psalm 56:8 “You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?”** He is not indifferent toward our pain. He is not cold and removed. One day, God promises to wipe away *every* tear, to right *every* wrong, remove *every* pain - and *heaven* reminds us that that such a hope is sure.

A second benefit the reality of heaven has for our suffering is that it points us to our greatest hope: *to be with God*. It reminds us that our suffering is never wasted. Paul writes in **2 Corinthians 4:17-18, “For this light momentary affliction is preparing us for 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.”** In the 18th century, Jonathan Edwards described heaven as being a place where everyone will be deeply satisfied. In picturing the idea of our **“eternal weight of glory”** he made it analogous to each of us having a cup and having it filled to the brim. Our cups may be of different sizes – some will have a thimble, others a glass, others a five-gallon bucket, but everyone will have a full cup. What makes the difference in the size of the cup?

Did you notice in **2 Cor 4**? Its Paul’s affliction—his suffering has an effect on the weight of glory he experiences in heaven[[6]](#footnote-6) - it’s preparing for him a weight of glory. As we endure *today* with patient faith, suffering has a way of carving out a deeper bowl for us – an expectation and appreciation of heaven when we get there. In this sense, we are helped in our suffering now, knowing that it is being used by God to give us a greater capacity to enjoy Him both now and in eternity!

Our longing for God may be the most important function of the reality of heaven in our suffering. If God is our greatest treasure then suffering, that once seemed like an insurmountable mountain, turns into a speed bump. That’s not to say that it won’t hurt anymore, just that we will not look to our circumstances to satisfy us. Consider Paul’s words in **Philippians 3:8** – **“Indeed, I count everything a 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...”**

Paul had just spent time reflecting on the things that were once valuable to him—his religious heritage, family background, education, and achievements in keeping the law, and now says, all those things are rubbish. In fact, is there anything, any category, that isn’t essentially included in Paul’s list that he considered rubbish? *Nothing*! So, whether his health, his relationships, his reputation—*everything* goes into the rubbish category, *when* he compares it to the surpassing value of knowing Christ. In that sense, His present love for Christ and hope to one day be with Him would be untouchable. He could be wasting away on the outside, but renewed on the inside. No one worries about their trash being ruined or stolen.

QUESTIONS?

1. **In Closing**

In closing I want us to consider two more verses. Listen for the *“wills”* and *“shalls”—*the surety:

**Job 11:16**: **“You will forget your misery; you will remember it as waters that have passed away.”**

**Psalm 17:15**: **“As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.”**

C.H. Spurgeon said in his sermon, “The Hope of Future Bliss”:

*“It is possible, though perhaps not very easy, to attain to that high and eminent position wherein we can say no longer do I hope, but I know…* ***‘when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.’*** *How many are there here of faith without fiery trial! He will never give a man the power to say that, “shall,” without trying him. He will not build a strong ship without subjecting it to the very mighty storms. He will not make you a mighty warrior if he does not intend to try your skill in battle. God’s swords must be used! The old Toledo blades of heaven must be smitten against the armor of the evil one and yet they shall not break, for they are of true Jerusalem metal which shall never snap! Oh, what a happy thing to have that faith to say, ‘I shall.’”*

**Practical Help (As time allows…)**

How can we continue to grow in faith from knowing how the story (how history) ends? A few suggestions:

* Read God’s word
	+ Meditate on **Revelation 4-5; 21-22**
	+ Meditate on **Psalm 2** – the Lord laughs, scoffs at those seeking to derail his program – our future is certain.
	+ Reflect on **1 Corinthians 15** – promise of a new body that works
* Pray
	+ Pray for heart of wisdom to number days rightly (**Ps. 90**)
	+ Examine your schedule – are you so busy that your focus is always on now,
	*“This day”—"today”?*
	+ Pray for a heart that is deeply satisfied in God **(Psalm 73:25-26; Phi. 3:8; 2 Cor. 4:16-18)**
* Good things to read:
	+ Jonathan Edwards sermon “Heaven, a World of Love” or “Sinners in the hands of an angry God.”
* Sing Hymns that help you reflect on heaven *[as teacher see if singing any of these in morning or evening service]*:
	+ It is well
	+ Jerusalem my happy home
	+ Lo He comes
	+ How sweet and awful is the place
	+ Hark I hear the harps eternal
	+ There is a happy land
	+ The sands of time are sinking
	+ I will glory in my Redeemer
	+ Victory in the Lamb
1. See 1 Thes. 4:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We need to pray as Moses in Psalm 90:12 asking God to “Teach us to number our days aright that we may gain a heart of wisdom. This after considering the brevity of life: “The length of our days is seventy years – or eighty, if we have the strength; yet the span is but trouble and sorrow, for *they quickly pass, and we fly away*” (Ps. 90:10). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rom. 3:10-11, 23; Eph. 2:3b [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rev. 21:27 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *When God Weeps* by Joni Eareckson Tada and Steven Estes, pg. 216 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. Matt 5:11-12 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)