

**Core Seminar**

**Suffering for the Glory of God**

**Class 4: God’s Grief over Suffering**

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***The empathy of a suffering God***

**Introduction and Importance of Scripture for “Understanding”**

Before we begin, I want us to take a short detour—to make a distinction as we think about the ultimate source and focus of our content for this class, especially today. In light of the volumes of self-help books that have been written on the topic of suffering, both Christian and secular, we’ve chosen to keep this course specifically biblically focused with spiritual truths—truth that leads further into a faith that will sustain us in trials and cause our lives to glorify God, not man.

In the first three weeks of this class, we laid out a logical framework for thinking through suffering. In Week 1, as hard as it is to understand, we saw that God doesn’t owe an explanation for suffering; instead he’s called us to faith. In Week 2 we considered the many purposes we see for suffering in the Bible and then we followed last week with the importance of understanding the future of suffering—the reality of heaven and hell. These are the very provisions for the faith God calls us to. Even with those truths in mind, if we’re honest, these answers while rock solid, can feel hard and stern when they rub against the very human condition of suffering, even to our own experience. So, at this stage it is good to pull on the “biblical truth” thread a bit before we begin.

I won’t ask anyone to raise their hand, but would you be acquainted with the experience that at some point, in certain trials, you’ve either thought, said to someone, or heard from a friend, *“I know the promises of God, but what has happened to them in this situation? This isn’t fair. Why does God allow these things?”* Now, we said earlier in the course that simply asking *“why”* isn’t wrong, it isn’t necessarily sin—it can be where healthy lament begins. But there is danger in this line of thinking because of where we could end up going from that “why” question. If we are not careful, we can end up turning in on ourselves—we can become overly self-focused. We can start thinking about the situation in a more worldly, natural, way—call it “rational” thought. Trials can begin taking up more and more of our minds and energy—we become miserable and unhappy, in time we may even not want to join with God’s people—we find ourselves missing more and more gatherings of the congregation; we become increasingly preoccupied with our situation and become even more miserable.

What do we do? When something happens that we don’t understand (which is the reason we ask “why”…) one of the first things we can do is ask ourselves, *“Am I facing this situation with ‘spiritual’, ‘biblical’, thought or have I reverted unconsciously to a more natural, ‘rational’ way of thinking?”*

Let me clarify a bit the difference between “rational” and “spiritual” thoughts as they are being used. To do this I am helped by some thoughts from Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a medically trained doctor and pastor at London’s Westminster Chapel in the middle of last century who said:

*“While I draw a distinction between rational thinking and spiritual thinking, I am not for a moment suggesting that spiritual thinking is irrational. The difference between them is that rational thinking is on ground-level only; spiritual thinking is equally rational, but it takes in a higher level as well as the lower level. It takes in all the facts instead of merely some of them.”*

There are many ways we can find to help us feel better temporarily; ways of forgetting our troubles—getting lost on the internet and social media, movies, work, cynicism…or pick an addiction. Although those things may give temporary reliefthe more important question for us to ask is do they give us *understanding*; do they really help us see through our trouble. In the end our test shouldn’t be whether something makes us feel better, but whether it gives us understanding.

We know suffering is a fight for faith. When we are uncertain, one of the most important things we can do is to catch our thinking—to find something in which we are certain and take our stand on that. Again, the outline of the course and what we are talking about today, is all from the bible—it’s “spiritual” thought. Even more, today it is focused on Jesus and, be sure, in him we can take our stand. So, as we go forward and unpack how knowing that Jesus suffered can help us in our own suffering, I trust you realize how important the Scriptures are in our response to suffering, to give us those certain truths to stand on—to protect us during trials from turning our minds over in worldly thought.

So… Look again at the title for our class this morning*—“God’s Grief Over Suffering: The Empathy of a Suffering God.”* Think about it, of all the gods worshipped in this world, only one is a God who has suffered. That is, at the same time, the grand absurdity and the grand wonder of the Christian faith. We serve a God who has suffered. He’s walked that road. He understands. He knows us. If we understand this, we can see how his sufferings bring comfort in our weakness and we can see how this can raise our thinking from the “rational”, ground-level, to a higher-level “spiritual” thinking which convinces us we can trust him all the more. That is the pattern we want to be able to follow!

As we explore this topic, we’ll begin with a brief look at the substance of that suffering in the person of Jesus Christ. And then we’ll take time to unpack Hebrews 4, which says that because of his suffering, Christ *understands* us—and 1 Peter 2, that gives Christ’s suffering as an *example*.

1. **The Cross: Where Love *and* Justice Meet**

So how has God suffered? Most supremely, in the person of Jesus Christ, at the cross. He suffered and died a horrible death in our place so that God could show mercy to sinners—that he would be glorified, and we could be reconciled. For the rest of this class, we’ll talk about how we can experience the mercy of God—because when we suffer, what we need is mercy. But first we need to recognize that God’s mercy—to us as sinners—could never come without Christ’s suffering on the cross. God’s just, right? And we’ve sinned against him. That means we deserve his punishment, not his mercy. So how do we get mercy?

**2 Corinthians 5:21** puts it like this: **“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”[[1]](#footnote-1)** [Explain.]

Jesus didn’t simply suffer as an example or as an inspiration—though both are true. He suffered in our place. He suffered what we deserved. And so his suffering as a substitute purchases our ability to even consider his suffering as a source of comfort and as an example. It purchases our ability to even consider the rest of this class. Because of Jesus’ suffering, our own suffering can make us fit for heaven—rather than simply being a down payment on hell.

Most importantly, Jesus’ suffering was for us. But beyond that, it offers us both comfort and example, which we’ll turn to for the remainder of our time together this morning.

1. **Comfort in God’s Empathy**

One aspect of suffering that can feel unbearable is the sense that we are alone. Solomon writes **“Two are better than one…For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!”** (**Ecc. 4:9a, 10**). Think of what suffering is like when no one understands, no one’s been through it before, no one who can help you up.

Yet, no matter how alone we may feel in our suffering, when we come to the cross, we find a God who can empathize. Just a quick primer on the English language: sympathy is when you feel for someone. But empathy is when you know from experience what they’re going through. And the amazing thing about the Christian God is that he not just sympathizes—that would be incredible in and of itself. But he empathizes. Here’s what we read in **Hebrews 4:14-16**:

**14Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**

In His incarnation, Jesus walks in our shoes. And so, he is able to help us when we are suffering.

John Stott helps us here with a highly fictional image of billions of people, seated before God’s judgement throne. He writes:

*“Some shrank back, but others objected. ‘Can God judge us? How can He know about suffering?’ snapped one woman who had suffered in a Nazi concentration camp. ‘We endured terror…beatings…torture…death!’ Others agreed. What did God know of weeping, hunger and hatred? God leads a sheltered life in heaven, they said. Someone from Hiroshima, people born deformed, others murdered, each sent forward a leader. They concluded that before God could judge them, He should have to endure suffering as they did and [they] pronounced a sentence [on God]:*

*Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Let his close friends betray him. Let him face false charges. Let a prejudiced jury try him and a cowardly judge convict him. Let him be tortured. Let him be utterly alone. Then, bloody and forsaken, let him die.*

*The room grew silent after the sentence against God had been pronounced. No one moved, and a weight fell on each face. For suddenly, all knew that God already had served his sentence[[2]](#footnote-2).”*

Going back to the fuller passage from **Hebrews 4** that you see in your handout, let me take it in four pieces so that we can see exactly how God’s empathy in our suffering brings comfort.

1. Jesus understands our weakness. So much of the difficulty of suffering comes when we feel that God is asking us to do more than what is humanly possible. But guess what? God became a human! He understands. That’s the beauty of the incarnation. There are lots of practical applications of this. But here’s one you may not have thought of: use this to read the Psalms in a fresh way.

As one writer has put it, virtually every Psalm is either about the Messiah or bythe Messiah[[3]](#footnote-3). And so they say things that go beyond what any human author had ever experienced. **Psalm 1**, for example: **“his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.”** Surely no one but Jesus epitomized that. Or **Psalm 22**, words that were written for Jesus to use: **“…they have pierced my hands and my feet—I can count all my bones—they stare and gloat over me” . . . (Ps 22:16b-17) “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22:1)** Many of the Psalms describe the suffering of Jesus. Use them to walk through your own suffering as the words of the one who has walked them before. Jesus was weak, and through the Psalms he explores faith in weakness.

1. Jesus was tempted in every respect that we are. **Hebrews 4** *doesn’t* say that Jesus has suffered in every way that we have. But he has been tempted in every way. And if suffering is most essentially a struggle for faith, and faith is a struggle against the temptation to trust in something else, that means that Jesus has experienced the crux of every trial you will ever face. Let’s say that your boyfriend/girlfriend breaks up with you. Has Jesus experienced that suffering? No. But what is the sharp edge of that trial? It’s your struggle to trust a God who just took away in a moment all that you hoped for in that relationship. Who just quenched your dreams and your happiness. Now—was Jesus tempted in that way? Most certainly. Just think of what was behind his tears in Gethsemane.

So use that to trust his wisdom in your suffering. Does he call you to be abandoned? Persecuted? Crushed? He has experienced all that and more. He knows exactly what he is doing, and knows exactly how it feels. You can trust him.

1. Yet without sin. Tempted in every way yet without sin. Jesus never gave in. In fact, he’s been tempted in ways we never have, because temptation ceases the moment we give in. But Jesus never gave in. I venture no one in this room could say the same—that we’ve never given in. But, with his help we also never give in.
2. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence. What’s the application of these first three truths? It’s perseverance in prayer. Remember **Romans 8:26—“…the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”** Remember that the Spirit who intercedes for you is the same God who suffered for you at the cross. It is a great comfort to know that we can always approach God in prayer.

And what’s the point of all of this? Look back to verse 14: **“let us hold fast our confession.”** Suffering is a battle for steadfastness—it is a battle for faith. And God’s empathy toward us in our suffering is comfort that helps us to trust. Tim Keller puts it well. *“If we…ask the question: ‘Why does God allow evil and suffering to continue?’ and we look at the cross of Jesus, we still do not know what the answer is. However, we know what the answer isn’t. It can’t be that he doesn’t love us. It can’t be that He is indifferent or detached from our condition. God takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he was willing to take it on himself…So, if we embrace the Christian teaching that Jesus is God and that he went to the Cross, then we have deep consolation and strength to face the brutal realities of life on earth[[4]](#footnote-4).”*

At the Cross, we see what kind of God we are trusting – a God who understands. He’s not cold and indifferent. In fact, as we’ve quoted before, **Psalm 56** says that he cares so much that he counts every toss and turn at night and catches each and every tear in a bottle[[5]](#footnote-5).

1. **Jesus’ Suffering is an Example for Us**

In **1 Peter 2:20b-24** we read this:

**“20But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. 21For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you might follow in his steps. 22He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. 24He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”**

Now, as I mentioned before, Jesus is not *primarily* an example for us to follow. That’s what we see in the last verse of this passage. Christ’s death was substitutionary. But it *is* alsoan example for us to follow.

In particular in this passage, he’s an example in three ways from verses 22 and 23.

1. He committed no sin. How often are we tempted to sin while suffering? Your boss unfairly pins a failed project on you and the next day you see his windows open in the parking lot as it begins to rain. What would it mean to love your enemy? And you’re thinking: *“look—I’ve taken this in a pretty Christian way so far. Can’t I just ignore that?” But that’s not what Jesus did, is it? “He committed no sin.”*
2. No deceit was found in his mouth. Truth-telling in suffering is crucial. We must learn to tell the truth about ourselves, about our accusers, and about God. All three of these are hard. In suffering we need to speak the truth about ourselves—admitting our own sin and the fact that at least some of our suffering may be our own fault. Second, in suffering we need to speak the truth about our enemies. When we’ve been wronged, it’s easy to exaggerate, isn’t it? To demonize others to make things look as outrageous to others as they feel for us. Now, sparking that kind of outrage might make me feel better for a time. But if it comes at the expense of the truth, all we will have succeeded in doing is distorting the perspective of a friend who could actually help me. And third, we need to speak the truth about God.

The Psalms are a wonderful example of what it looks like to ask agonizing questions—and yet not accuse God of evil. Speaking truth about God to ourselves and others requires self-discipline and a good friend to correct us. And it is vitally important.

1. He did not retaliate. Peter says he didn’t even threaten. There are a million little ways that we can retaliate when we’re suffering. A million little ways that we can punish others and that we can think we’re punishing God. But in suffering, Jesus is our example of one who suffered without retaliation. He left vengeance to God.

Jesus committed no sin, had no deceit in his mouth, and never retaliated—that’s quite a standard, isn’t it! But keep in mind that Jesus’ example isn’t another law to follow, but a pointer to what is best for us. If you endure suffering as he did, you will be glad for it. Jesus’ example points to freedom and joy. And so, just like in our verses from Hebrews, we see all of this summed up in faith. **“Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.”** How do we not sin in suffering? How do we not lie? How do we not retaliate? We trust God. When we fight with a spouse or a friend, when we’re persecuted for our faith, when someone struggles not to look at pornography or is mourning the loss of a friend—we need to trust that all of this has been carefully measured out by our loving Savior. And for all the things Jesus suffered, we can rejoice in the fact that though He suffered the wrath of God for our sin, we never will.

1. **Conclusion**

So let’s put all three of these pieces together. Let’s say that I’m being slandered by my neighbor. And with that suffering comes a host of temptations. Temptation to slander back, to defend myself in a sinful way, to be embittered against God for allowing this, just to name three. How does the cross help me here? (1) I remember that what I need in my temptation is both justice and mercy: justice for the evil I’m suffering and mercy to help me through it. And Jesus purchased a just God’s mercy for me at the cross. (2) I need to remember that Jesus was tempted in every way I am. He knows exactly what I’m going through. And beyond that, he was slandered himself. So, return to his Word and read about Jesus being slandered in Matthew 26 and picture what he went through. Put him in the words of Psalm 7 where David describes the slander he experienced with words that Jesus later took for himself. And reflect on his world for a bit. As you understand Jesus’ experience, consider how well he understands your present trial, and be encouraged in your prayer for deliverance—maybe even using that prayer in Psalm 7. Then, as your trust in God’s providential care increases through understanding his empathy in your suffering, turn and look to Jesus as an example. If you trust that he knows what he’s doing, you’ll be able to control that inner rebellious streak that wants to act out. If you trust that what he’s doing is good, you’ll speak the truth about him and about your own complicity in this matter. If you trust that your good God is completely in control, you’ll leave vengeance to him and face each day with humility, able to seek the good that God intends for you to do in this difficulty rather than being consumed with defending yourself.

We’ll conclude with a thought from John Stott:

*I could never believe in God, if it were not for the cross…In the real world of pain, how could one worship a god who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in light of his.[[6]](#footnote-6)*

1. Hebrews 2:14-18 is a fitting explanation of this in light of where we’ll go with Hebrews 4 later in the class. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Cross of Christ* by John Stott, pg. 327 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Charles Drew, *The Ancient Love Song: Finding Christ in the Old Testament* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *The Reason for God,* by Tim Keller, pg. 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ps. 56:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *The Cross of Christ,* by John Stott, pgs. 335-336 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)