

**Core Seminar**

**Suffering for the Glory of God**

**Class 5: Unbiblical Reactions to Suffering**

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***Temptations to Find Hope in What is Passing Away***

**Introduction**

Have you ever rented one of the electric scooters that line the streets of the city? Imagine that you’re racing down a street pocked with potholes, bumps, and manhole covers, and if you veer too far to avoid one of those obstacles you also have to negotiate cars. While you ultimately need to keep your focus on maintaining your way to your destination (your goal), it can be perilous to try to do so without maneuvering around the en route dangers of the road

And the same is true in times of suffering. Despite all the pitfalls of the route we can’t lose focus on the destination—we do best when we set our minds on the goal, not all the obstacles. Just like Jesus, **“who, for the joy that was set before him endured the cross . . .” (Heb 12:2)**

But today’s class is not really about the goal; it’s about the potholes that can take us out along the way. While they are *not* our focus, we need to know what we may hit. The reason we have an entire core seminar on suffering well is because of how easily it is to suffer poorly. So, today we’ll spend time thinking through some of the most common ways that we can suffer poorly. The dangers in the road, so to speak.

Suffering has a way of tempting us to lose sight of what God is really like, to minimize one or more of God’s attributes. Suffering poorly, at its root, has a deficient view of who God is. Even people whose theology is correctly fashioned in their heads can suffer poorly because their *practical* theology (the view of God that actually drives their hopes and fears and actions) is false.

In his letter to a group of Christians under pressure, Peter exhorts them, **“*Be sober-minded; be watchful…the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*” (1 Pet. 5:8).**

One way *to* be watchful is to be aware of unbiblical responses to suffering. The more we do, the more equipped we’ll be to respond in a God-honoring way. So, for the rest of our time together we will discuss five unbiblical responses to suffering.

Now, five will be a lot through which to think this morning. As a practical matter, consider reflecting later on the 1-2 that might challenge you the most. And keep in mind to look for gaps between the theology you know and the theology you show in your daily life. Where are there gaps in your practical theology that will trip you up when times of suffering come your way?

1. **The stiff upper lip - *God doesn’t exist***

Our first unbiblical response may be an atheistic response. And perhaps surprisingly, it is extremely common among Christians. It’s the “grin and bear it” strategy for dealing with suffering—the stiff upper lip, tough it out. **WHY can that be an atheistic strategy?**

It says that in a time of great difficulty, I’m going to persevere/move forward under *my own* power—as if God did not exist. I am going to keep this to myself because I’ve got it. My strategy is all about what *I’m* going to do . . . and in those moments I become a practical atheist.

There’s something about asking for help that is humbling, and ever since Adam and Eve gave into the temptation that they could be better off if *they* were God[[1]](#footnote-1) (independent, self-reliant, deciding what’s good) . . . we often look to our own strength and are unwilling to admit to others that we need help. Even when we’re suffering, there are times we’d rather grin and bear it than ask for help and be seen as weak.

**Two thoughts on how to escape this unbiblical response:**

1. **Humble yourself.** Self-reliance *can* be a form of pride, and Scripture’s remedy for pride is humility. Let’s think about Peter’s words to suffering Christians, **“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:6-7)**

This verse tells us three things. **First**, recognize self-reliance as pride, which should be confessed as sin. **Second**, recognize God (not you) as the mighty Savior. And **third**, demonstrate that humility by casting your cares on him[[2]](#footnote-2). Do you have it all together? No! That’s the admission you made when you became a Christian. Is temptation hard? Yes! Jesus certainly thought so. Do we showcase God’s glory when we stubbornly try to deal with things ourselves? No! We don’t. And quite often we end faring poorly if we do so.

1. **Consider God’s goals for your suffering**. Sometimes it can be difficult to *both* depend on God *and* be responsible. Say, for example, that you have a bad back. There are things you should do to address it (doctor, avoid lifting heavy things . . .). But I was just talking about depending on God, so what does that mean where we might also work to mitigate our suffering? Consider God’s goals in this suffering.

Let’s think of Peter’s words about trial in **1 Peter 1, “These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”**

You can do a lot to help your back to heal. But **you cannot refine your own faith**—you cannot make sure that your faith endures to the end and results in praise to God.

When we consider God’s goals for our trials, we recognize how powerless we are to achieve them—not matter how many things may seem within our control. Considering God’s goals for our suffering is a good way out of self-reliance.

So be responsible. Ice that back! But **remind yourself how little control** you have over the things that really matter in this trial. And **hold fast God’s promise** that **He *will* accomplish** those things that are so important and so far out of your hands.

1. **Escape – *Running to false gods***

Then there’s the response of escape: turning to something other than God for relief. For a moment, it feels like we’ve ‘escaped’ from our problems. Then we sober up, find that nothing has changed, and the cycle continues. How do we escape? Sometimes we literally flee. We flee suffering through drugs and alcohol. We flee a difficult marriage through divorce, a difficult relationship through the silent treatment. Sometimes we try to escape through distraction—our screens, jobs, sex, shopping, food, etc. **What are other ways?**

Sometimes it’s simply fantasy; we create a world in our heads where everything goes the way we want it to. In all these escapes, what we initially thought to be a ‘harmless distraction’ takes over our lives. We’ve invested in the empty promises of these false gods we’re trusting. And, so, **we avoid having to trust the real God**. It’s what the Bible calls idolatry.

God’s people in the Old Testament did exactly this when they put their trust in Egypt instead of in God to protect them from the powerful Assyrian army. But their choice would prove devastating:

**“‘Ah, stubborn children,’ declares the Lord, ‘who carry out a plan, but not mine, and who make an alliance, but not of my Spirit, that they may add sin to sin; who set out to go down to Egypt, without asking for my direction, to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt! Therefore shall the protection of Pharaoh turn to your shame, and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt to your humiliation…Egypt’s help is worthless and empty.’” (Isa. 30:1-3, 7a).**

As he does so often, God promises that in mercy he will destroy this false savior (Egypt) so his people will learn to rely on him.

One way we can **test** to see if something is a helpful diversion, or an unhelpful escape, is to look at our response when it’s finished.

* Did your **vacation give you space to rest** and think so that you’re geared up to seek God’s purposes in a difficult trial back at home? **Or are you grumbling** now that you have to return to the mess of your life?
* If you work a lot, why do you work as many hours as you do?

Christians are not ascetics; we are not called to deny ourselves from pleasurable things this world has to offer. There are many nice things you may enjoy during suffering (a meal out, a massage, a vacation) that can give you comfort (refuge) and help you to trust God, not to give the illusion of escaping our need of trusting Him.

But what if you find yourself seeking escape? We should remind ourselves and each other, as Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 7**, to not be engrossed with worldly escapes: **“For the present form of this world is passing away” (v. 29-31).** The sweet reality that is about to dawn in the new heavens and the new earth is far better than any escape we can ever experience.

1. **I deserve better than this - *God rewards the righteous***

OK—here’s another unbiblical response to which Christians can be prone. “I deserve better than this.” Which can lead to anger or despair.

**Why anger?** Because I feel **God has betrayed me**. I had a deal with God; I would follow him, sacrifice lifestyle and priorities for him, and he’d make my paths straight with a comfortable life. Bad things are supposed to happen to the people *out there*. Not me. We’re the good people.

And this can just as easily lead to **despair** because suffering makes me wonder if I’m not good enough for God. You might call this the “why me” problem.

Did you hear the bad theology there? While I’m thinking it’s unfair for God to do this to me, actually God has decided that my plans—for a nice, comfortable life—weren’t big enough. **Can you think of examples from Scripture of this?**

Old Testament Israel is an example. They wanted a nice, comfortable life as God’s special people. But God had different plans. **Isaiah 49:6, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”**

**God sees the full story; we do not**. Consider how those much larger and much better plans of God were so disruptive to Israel’s comfort. They involved God’s refining discipline that we read through the prophets. God’s larger plans subjected Israel to Roman occupation so that people from Israel would move to every part of the empire—so that at Pentecost when the gospel was first proclaimed, we read that “there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.” God’s plans tore the Jewish nation apart as the emerging Christians sect embraced their gentile brothers and sisters. God had much bigger plans than Israel—and Israel suffered as a result. But wouldn’t we all say now it was worth it?

Even with solid theology, we can struggle when we forget God’s promises. Writing to a group of Christians who were suffering, Peter writes, **“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Pet. 4:12).**

Perhaps that is how you can diagnose yourself in this category: **do you expect to suffer?** Would you be *surprised* if a decade went by and nothing bad happened to you? Or do you basically assume that life will continue on as it has? If you do, I suspect that you’ve got some problems in your practical theology.

And, in particular, we should not be surprised when we run into suffering for being a Christian and living in light of the gospel. Not because we’re pessimistic, but because suffering is part of following Jesus. Instead of being surprised, Peter calls us to **“rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.” (1 Pet. 4:13).**

It is not natural for us to rejoice when we face suffering for being a Christian. But when we understand that it has come because God’s plans are bigger and better than our own, God gives us the grace to rejoice because we’re not ashamed to be known as Jesus’ followers.

1. **Fear – *God can’t help***

The next unbiblical response to suffering is thinking **God can’t help**. The trial is beyond His control. An idea that ran through evangelicalism a few years ago (and before that) called the “openness of God” or “Open Theology” hypothesized that God cannot predict all future events. It’s thought that in this way, human freedom and God’s goodness are preserved.

Listen to how one such theologian puts it:

*“Decisions not yet made do not exist anywhere to be known even by God. They are potential – yet to be realized but not yet actual. God can predict a great deal of what we will choose to do, but not all of it, because some of it remains hidden in the mystery of human freedom…The God of the Bible displays an openness to the future that the traditional view of omniscience simply cannot accommodate.[[3]](#footnote-3)”*

Denying God’s knowledge of future events might be intended to offer comfort to those who may question the goodness of God—i.e. God means well even when bad things happen—but it actually, radically redefines God in an unbiblical way: as changing, doubting, failing though trying His best.[[4]](#footnote-4) And that unbiblical and, in any event, no comfort.

But the Bible is clear that God is completely sovereign, and he knows all things, even before they happen:

* **Isa. 46:9b-10 “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose’”**
* **Ps. 139:4 “Before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely, O LORD***.”*

When we hurt, it’s not uncommon to wonder if God knows what he’s doing. But he does, doesn’t he. He is good, He is in control, and He is careful with us.

This is what Asaph realized as he was struggling to trust God in Psalm 73. He starts by observing that the wicked prospered while the godly suffered, and he began to wonder if he’d trusted God in vain. Then his understanding changed: **“When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end” (Ps. 73:16-17).**

From a limited human perspective, he couldn’t make sense of it, but when he looked at it from God’s perspective ([v17] *when he went into the sanctuary of God*) and saw their end, he was at peace. Compared to a wise God, he declares, **“I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you” (Ps. 73:22b).**

There will frequently be times when we will not be able to understand why God allowed something to happen. In those moments, we have simply to trust Him and go on obeying His wise commands for our lives—*knowing* that He is working all things together for good.

1. **God has it out for me – *God is not good for me***

Sometimes we *know* that God is good; we *know* that he is in control. I guess the question we wrestle with is, “is God good *for* *me*?” Here are two forms it may take:

1. **First is the question of guilt**. Is he punishing me for something? In other words, is He acting for my good through this suffering, or punishing me because of something I did?
2. The second way we can doubt God’s goodness is **in the question of His purposes**. Maybe I don’t *want* what God is doing in this trial. Maybe I don’t *want* to be a cog in His wheel. But my theology is too good to think I can get out of it. And so I just sit and sulk. I become God’s obedient, but **reluctant** servant. The example of Jonah comes to mind.

OK, a few thoughts here. **First, let’s address the question of guilt.** Is God punishing you for something? Let’s look at **Hebrews 12:5-8:**

***“And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?
 ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,***

 ***nor be weary when reproved by him.***

 ***For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,***

 ***and chastises every son whom he receives.’
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.”***

A few observations on these verses[[5]](#footnote-5):

1. This discussion of discipline is a “word of encouragement” (12:5). This makes sense if the Christian’s desire is to please the heavenly Father.[[6]](#footnote-6)
2. **God disciplines us for our *good***. Parents who have disciplined their children out of love for them understand this. The writer makes this connection in 12:9 – if we can submit to the discipline of our parents, who are sinners, how much more the discipline of a good God! And so even the idea of punishment that we see in that phrase, “and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son” is not judicial punishment. (Romans 8 tell us that there is no condemnation for those that are in Christ Jesus.) Rather, this punishment is the kind of discipline we give to our kids. For their good. Because we love them.

So, is my suffering God’s **discipline for a specific sin**? D. A. Carson puts it helpfully:

 *“It is the uncertainty of reading what is going on that sometimes breeds pain. Is the particular blow I am facing God’s way of telling me to change something? Or is it a form of discipline designed to toughen me or soften me to make me more useful? Or is it part of the heritage of all sons and daughters of Adam who live this side of [Christ’s Return], unrelated to discipline but part of God’s mysterious providence in a fallen world? But must we always decide? If a little self-examination shows us how to improve we ought to improve. But there are times when all that the Christian can responsibly do is to trust his heavenly Father in the midst of the darkness and pain.[[7]](#footnote-7)”*

**God uses the local church** to help in this area. We can ask a trusted friend to see if, in light of Scripture, there is something we need to change. God’s love for His children is unwavering. Provided that we are willing to follow Jesus, He will be faithful to lead[[8]](#footnote-8) and correct along the way - that’s what a good shepherd does.

But what about the **second question** of God’s purposes? **The Jonah example** I gave earlier? Maybe you know that God uses your suffering for his good ends, you just don’t believe that those ends are good *for you*? Does the cost of what God is doing in your life you decrease your interest in his purposes? A few thoughts for you here:

1. **Test yourself**. Ask yourself whether, in part, you really don’t want to be made like Jesus if this is the way God would have you do it. A tougher question: are you following Christ *for Christ* or for some other reason, like other benefits? Having questions during your suffering does not mean you are not a Christian, but testing on what you are relying/hoping can help you to see explicitly where your heart is.

1. But **this is a common struggle for Christians**. You are struggling for control of your life. You want your life one way. God wants it another way. What’s going to happen? Well, if you’re Jonah, God will pursue you to the depths of the sea to get His way with you. That can be a terrifying prospect. He will win. And He has promised that His way really is good for you. How to struggle through this? We’ll talk about this much more in the next two weeks. But in short, **pray for FAITH in God’s goodness.** You know he is good, but as Jonathan Edwards put it, you have not “ascertained” his goodness. You have not experienced him satisfyingly as good for you. Pray for faith in God’s goodness, **spend time reading of his goodness** to you in His Word, and then talk with good Christian friends about what it looks like to believe in God’s goodness *for you.* Your job is to submit yourself to Him. Not reluctantly, but gladly. Knowing that he cares for you.
2. **Conclusion**

Five unbiblical reactions to suffering. The alternative? To trust the real God as revealed in Scripture. How we do that is the topic of our class the next two weeks as we try to unpack the idea of struggling for faith in God’s sovereignty and goodness.

QUESTIONS?

1. See Gen. 3:5 (“For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’”) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is not to say that we aren’t called to persevere in the Christian life; we are (e.g. 2 Tim. 2:3)! The point is that our perseverance must be rooted in the grace and power of God, not ourselves (e.g. 2 Tim. 2:1-2). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *The Grace of God, the Will of Man,* by Clark H. Pinnock (ed.), pg. 25-26 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Open Theists essentially imply that God makes mistakes because of the uncertainty of the future. In other words, He may ‘predict’ one thing while something else happens. How could we trust a God who makes mistakes? [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See 12:4 “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.” The context is about Christians fighting sin. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Paul illustrates this positively in 2 Cor. 12 when he welcomes a thorn in his flesh that God would use to curtail his pride. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *How Long O Lord,* by D.A. Carson, pg. 66 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Psalm 139:23-24 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)