

**Core Seminar**

**Suffering for the Glory of God**

**Class 9: Suffering as Witness**

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*How does suffering serve God’s purpose to make his glory known?*

Before I answer that question, I’m going to begin with a story by David Hadju that appeared in the Atlantic a few years ago about a trip to a jazz club[[1]](#footnote-1) in Greenwich Village. In the last week of August, Hadju is at the club and the bandleader is Charles McPherson, an alto saxophonist. As Hadju writes, *“although he is a superior talent, he’s not a top jazz attraction, which is why he was scheduled for [the slowest week of the year].”* And he continues.

*“The performance was languid, and my eyes drifted, setting eventually on the trumpet player, because he was turned away from the audience and even from the rest of the band, staring at the floor.”*

*The trumpeter looks somewhat familiar, even turned away—and so during a piece by Charlie Parker, Hadju turns to the guy next to him, asks if it might be Wynton Marsalis—one of the most famous names in jazz.*

*“’I very seriously doubt that’ [the man snaps] back, as if [Hadju adds] I had asked if it was Parker [the person who had wrote the music] himself.”*

The next song is a trumpet solo. It’s a ballad: “I Don’t Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You.” Written for a 1930s romance film, the piece, Hadju writes, *“can bring out the sadness in any scene”—and the trumpeter “appeared deeply attuned to its melancholy. He performed the song in murmurs and sighs, at points nearly talking the words in notes. It was a wrenching act of creative expression. When he reached the climax, [the trumpet player] played the final phrase, the title statement, in declarative tones, allowing each successive note to linger in the air a bit longer. “I don't stand... a ghost... of... a... chance....”*

The room is perfectly silent. [*cell phone]* And someone’s cell phone goes off. Here’s what Hadju writes, *“[it blares] a rapid sing-song melody in electronic bleeps. People started giggling and picking up their drinks. The moment — the whole performance — unraveled. I scrawled on a sheet of newspaper, MAGIC, RUINED.”*

But, the trumpet player pauses. Motionless. His eyebrows still arched. The cell phone caller scoots out into the hall. The chatter the room grows louder. The trumpet player is still frozen at the microphone. And he begins to play again. He plays “the . . . cell-phone melody note-for-note.” He repeats it. And begins improvising variations on the tune. The audience slowly comes back to him. In a few minutes, he’s resolved the improvisation, changed keys a few times, throttled down to a ballad tempo. And ends up exactly where he had left off [with the last two words of the phrase when he was interrupted--“With you.”

As Hadju writes, *“The ovation was tremendous.”* Turns out that the man with his back to the audience, playing backup to a no-name band leader, on the slowest night of the year—was the greatest name in Jazz. It was Marsalis on the trumpet.

Why do I share this story? Because we see more glory in redemption than in creation.

What is it that reveals who this trumpeter is? Not his ability to play the piece; it’s his ability to resurrect it from near-disaster.

We see more glory in redemption than in creation.

**Suffering as Witness**

That is the basic principle that undergirds our class for this morning, because at its core, that is how suffering can become a witness to the power of the gospel. And it’s a principle that we see running all through Scripture.

So, God’s plan to save the chosen family from starvation involves Joseph being sold as a slave into Egypt, thrown into prison, and—when all seemed hopeless—suddenly becoming prime minister of Egypt. It is how broken the situation was that showcased the power of God. As Joseph himself says to his brothers in **Genesis 50:20**, **“…As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive...”**

Later on, God doesn’t just bring his people back to the Promised Land—he hardens the heart of the most powerful king on the earth so that it is only through his miraculous, awe-inspiring strength that he can rescue his people from the hand of the Egyptians. And where does he lead them? Into a dead end—with the Egyptian army closing in from behind and the Red Sea ahead. And so, his might and glory are displayed as the sea is parted and his people are saved.

It is only after she has lost everything that God transforms Naomi’s life into a blessing for all nations in the book of Ruth. Only after he is surrounded by the mighty Assyrian army that God rescues king Hezekiah in a single night. And only after they are thrown into a furnace so hot it killed the soldiers who bound them that God led Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego through the flames to humble the king. And only after God’s only son is convicted in a kangaroo court, flogged, stripped, and executed--that the cross becomes his tool to save us from our sin.

Do you see the pattern? Do you see how God works? God keeps his promises and always upholds and redeems his children; and this process is a great witness to the world. Sure, he lets things go pretty far as we try to prove we can do things on our terms, in our way and through our strength. But that always falls apart and when everything seems hopeless, and only a miracle would save God’s promises from extinction: you see God’s fingerprints all over that kind of thing. Through this we see God’s goodness and we see more of his glory in redemption than we often do simply in the created. More glory in creating blessing out of rescue than in creating that blessing in the first place. Which is why suffering can be such witness to the power of God.

But it’s still suffering, isn’t it? Joseph suffered in slavery and in prison for years before God’s purposes were revealed. Naomi lost her husband and two sons—and this side of heaven never knew what God was up to. And even though Jesus endured the cross, as **Hebrews** says, **“for the joy set before him,”** who would ever say that it was easy? He suffered like we never will.

We see more glory in redemption than in creation—and yet redemption so often starts in suffering. God redeems *to* a good state *from* a bad state—and the bad state involves suffering.

So, what is our part in all of this?

Look at **Philippians 2:14-16** on your handout:

**14Do all things without grumbling or disputing, 15that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, 16holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.**

I’ll paraphrase the passage. Conduct yourself as you suffer in a way that is truly supernatural—never even grumbling or arguing. Why? Because through suffering we are made holy. And as our lives look increasingly different from those around us, we will shine out. Like stars through the night sky. To expand on this briefly… Although a mystery, I do find it to be true that, *“…when the black clouds gather most, the light within us is always the brightest. When the night lowers and the tempest is coming on, the heavenly captain is always closest to His crew. It is a blessed thing, when we are most cast down, then it is that we are most lifted up by the consolations of Christ.”[[2]](#footnote-2)* And when we live our trials out in faith, **“holding fast to the word of life,”** the gospel that we hold out to the world will be seen as it really is, the power of Almighty God.

Now, as I mentioned in the very first class, this is at first overwhelming. Suffering is a struggle for faith because it challenges God’s claim to be both good and all-powerful. Remember that faith means *“…taking the bare Word of God and acting upon it because it is the Word of God…It means believing what God says simply and solely because He has said it.” (Martyn Lloyd Jones).* But, my goal as a Christian isn’t simply to *survive* suffering—it is to conduct myself in such a way as to actually point to the excellence of that same God who is leading me into suffering! Absent the rest of the classes so far, this just doesn’t make sense. But hopefully those of you who have shown up for all nine weeks so far are ready to begin considering—having trusted God so much that we are content with his will even in the midst of suffering—how can we now live through suffering in a way that points the world to him.

To do that, we’ll spend the rest of the class answering just two basic questions.

First, *how* does suffering proclaim the power of the gospel?

And second, with that in mind, *how* can we conduct ourselves in suffering as to point to Christ; to be a witness of Him and His glory?

**How does suffering proclaim the gospel?**

The best way to answer that first question is simply to see how this happens in the Bible. There are four basic categories that come to mind. [*As I work through them think if you have examples from your lives, or seen these in the lives of others, and then afterwards I’ll see if there are questions and you can share some thoughts.]*

1. By changing our circumstances.

The first is merely logistical. Think of the first chapters of Acts. Jesus says, **Acts 1,** that his followers **“will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth[[3]](#footnote-3).”**  So, what do the Christians do after Pentecost? They stay in Jerusalem. Through Acts 2 and 3 and 4, all the way through Acts 7. But then with the stoning of Stephen we read in **Acts 8**, **“And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles[[4]](#footnote-4).”** Judea and Samaria…exactly where Jesus had told them to go. Sometimes God uses suffering to drive his messengers into new places beyond what is familiar, and with them goes the gospel. That’s the first way that suffering proclaims the gospel. [Not just geographically]

1. The second? By making others bold.

Look at **Philippians 1:14** on your handout. This is what Paul writes: **“And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.”** Because of Paul’s sufferings, others spoke “more courageously and fearlessly.” When we see the example of someone suffering yet striving to make God’s faithfulness known, it can have a profound effect on those of us who are *not* suffering. It emboldens us to share the gospel.

1. Third, suffering showcases the hope of the gospel.

Think of **1 Peter 3:14-15**. **“But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.”** Peter assumes that a life of suffering, if lived well, a life that looks different from the world because it doesn’t fear the things the world fears, is a provocative life. And if your life is provocative, there’s going to be questions. So be prepared, be ready, to answer them.

1. And fourth, suffering well displays the value of knowing Christ.

In **Philippians 3:8**, Paul writes, **“Indeed, I count everything as 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.”** God isn’t glorified when we choose Him *for* His gifts. God is glorified when we choose Him as what is truly valuable over and above everything else. When we lose what this world values and yet don’t lose heart, it tells them that we have grabbed hold of something far more valuable than they ever imagined. And that commends the gospel.

**What is our role?**

So how can we do this? Most fundamentally, do what we’ve been talking about in this class. Fight for faith with God’s word. Lean on others in our church. And so forth. If you suffer in faith, you will commend the gospel.

But beyond that, there are a few other pieces of advice I can give you. And you can clump these into three categories: who we should talk to when we’re suffering, what we should talk about, and how we should live.

1. Who we should talk to
* In the last few classes, we’ve focused on your talking with Christians in times of suffering. But beyond that, don’t forget your non-Christian friends! They won’t share your same hope and perspective. But they do care for you…and watching how you grapple with this could impact them profoundly. You might do that by accepting your non-Christian friends’ offers of help. *[Insert personal story…]*

1. What to talk about
* Talk about your suffering. Be honest, be real—even with unbelieving friends—about where you’re struggling with. Just because you’re a Christian doesn’t mean you don’t struggle—it just means you struggle for different objectives with a different hope and with a different strength. Of course, remember the difference between describing what’s going on and complaining. After all, as we saw in Philippians, not complaining is perhaps one of the most powerful witnesses to the truth of the gospel in the midst of suffering. The difference between describing my struggle and complaining is a difference of heart attitude. Describing my struggle is in the context of my faith—even weak faith—that God cares and that he is in control. Complaining says that I don’t deserve this, God made a mistake, he doesn’t care. Describing suffering as the Psalmists do is also in the context of faith. Being honest about our struggles also recognizes what Jesus said in **Matthew 26** that, **“…the Spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”** We should be thankful for the difference between lack of faith and weakness of the flesh. Even God’s greatest men of faith often trembled physically at the prospects which confronted them (i.e. **Habakkuk 3:16**). To be weak in the flesh doesn’t necessarily mean you don’t have faith!
* Where possible, talk about your situation with unbelieving friends using the same words and ideas you do when you talk with your Christian friends [*I’ve found this particularly helpful and freeing—I can use my language of God and Scripture—almost matter-of-factly.]* Of course, you may need to de-Christianize your language a bit. But if you’re struggling for faith, say that you’re struggling for faith. If you’re finding God to be a comfort to you, explain what that looks like. Your answer to the question, “how’re you doing?” should be pretty much the same no matter who’s asking the question. “Pollyannaish” denials as a Christian (meaning playing the “Glad Game”—coming across like suffering doesn’t hurt or isn’t a challenge to your faith) don’t recognize the reality of suffering in the world nor showcase the value of Christ; they merely highlight our lack of integrity. Honestly, you can only fake “being ok” so long if you don’t really trust in the God you profess; eventually Christians and non-Christians alike will see through it.
* And then make sure you talk about the gospel. Can you explain the gospel to someone who isn’t familiar with the Christian faith? If you don’t, pick up one of the “Two Ways to Live” booklets on the bookstall and walk through it with a Christian friend.
* But beyond the gospel, make sure you can explain the reason for your hope, as we saw in 1 Peter. That’s often more personal than it is apologetic.  *“I can’t believe you’re still married after what your spouse did.” “Really? Would you be interested in knowing why?” “Sure!”* “*I’ll warn you: I can’t share the story without talking about faith.” “Not a problem.”* “So. . . . . .” and off you go. Explain where *your* faith comes from and why *you* can believe. That is a powerful connection to the witness of your life.
1. How to live

There are three things we see in the book of **1 Peter** that pertain specifically to living in a way that commends the gospel. It’ll be helpful to open up your Bibles to 1 Peter. Like many letters in the New Testament, 1 Peter begins with the truth of the gospel—the truth of who we *are* as Christians in chapters one and the beginning of chapter two. Then in **2:12** the book turns to talk about what we should *do* in response. **“Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.”** So, the goal here is evangelistic, the context laid out already in the book is one of suffering, and the means is the way we conduct our lives—lives that are to be provocative. What exactly does that involve?

1. The first thing Peter mentions is probably one you wouldn’t expect. And yet it’s a main thrust of the rest of the book. Look at the first phrase of the next sentence, **verse 13:** **“be subject.”** To the governing authorities. **Verse 18:** be subject. To masters. **Chapter 3, verse 1**: “be subject.” To your husband. And **5:5**—young men “be subject”—to the elders[[5]](#footnote-5). It would seem that the main way Peter has in mind that we commend the gospel while suffering is to respect the authorities God has placed over us. Why is that? Keep in mind that suffering is a struggle for faith. And so, suffering is a challenge to *God’s* authority. One of the ways we show the world that we are trusting him is by submitting to the authorities he has placed over us. Think of a common objection to Christianity: “I could never *trust* in a God who allows *evil* to happen.” Do you see that connection between suffering and authority? Of course, earthly authority can be abused and corrupted. The Bible never tells us to submit to authority when doing so means disobeying God. But the *essence* of authority isn’t repressive—it’s a source of blessing. It’s God’s idea. So, when we’re suffering, if we respect authority, we live in a way that turns this world’s problem with suffering on its head. And that is provocative. I realize this may be a new concept for many of us. But keep chewing on it—and read through **1 Peter.** The more you think about it, the more the connection between suffering and submission will make sense. So, if you’re suffering because of an unfair boss, go out of your way to show respect in how your talk about them—even if you’re working through the appropriate channels to limit their negative affect on the organization. People will notice.
2. And that brings into focus Peter’s second command for those who are suffering. **Chapter 2, verse 22-23**: following Jesus’ example, we entrust ourselves to him who judges justly. Our trust isn’t finally in earthly authorities—especially when they fail to protect us from injustice. We submit to earthly authorities because we entrust ourselves to God.

If we *don’t* entrust ourselves to God, we act during suffering as those who are fearful, or bitter, or anxious, or vindictive. But when we *do* entrust ourselves to God, it produces a life that is very strange to this world.

1. And third, **3:16-17**: suffer with a clear conscience. That’s a theme Peter hits on several times[[6]](#footnote-6). When you’re suffering, it’s tempting to cut corners. But in times of difficulty, your life is under especially sharp scrutiny. So be extra careful to ensure that your conduct is above reproach, so that, end of verse 16: **“those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.”**

**Conclusion**

That’s a lot to take on board, isn’t it? Strategies for suffering in a way to bring glory to the God under whose hand we suffer. It would seem like an impossibility. But that’s exactly the point, isn’t it? When we live in this way, the world cannot help but sit up and take notice, because there is something so obviously supernatural about this kind of life. So, live in this way—be honest and use biblical language as we work out our faith; and let the glory be God’s. After all, we serve a God who is in the business of doing the impossible.

**Q & A**

1. *Wynton’s Blues*, The Atlantic Monthly, March 2003, David Hajdu. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Charles H. Spurgeon, Sermon No 13, “Consolation Proportionate to Spiritual Sufferings”, March 11, 1855 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Acts 1:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Acts 8:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “older men” in the 1984 NIV; “elders” in the ESV, NASB, HCSB, and NIV. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 1 Peter 2:20, 3:17 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)