

**Core Seminar**

**Suffering for the Glory of God**

**Class 11: Suffering for the Gospel**

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Throughout our class, we’ve spent a number of weeks looking at suffering in general. Suffering that comes from living in a fallen world; suffering that comes from God’s loving discipline; suffering that comes from our own folly. We’ve considered the fact that suffering tempts us to think wrongly about who God is. When our view God is skewed, our trust often falls on things other than Him whether that be in ourselves, other people, an escape, or technology. Knowing that, the struggle we have in suffering is essentially a fight for faith – a fight we cannot win without the Spirit of God, the word of God and the people of God. But it’s also a fight that, by God’s grace, can be one of the most profound platforms we have to glorify God.

Today, we need to narrow our focus a bit though and consider a specific type of suffering – a type of suffering that is unique to being a follower of Jesus: *persecution.*

In 1955, Jim Elliot, Ed McCully, Roger Youderian, Pete Fleming and Nate Saint set out to reach Ecuador’s Waodani Indians with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Compelled by Jesus’ command to go and make disciples of *all* nations, these men and their families had uprooted their lives from the United States with a passion to see those who’d never heard of Christ, come to worship Him and find forgiveness in Him. The Waodani Indians lived in the middle of the jungle – so the move would involve transitioning from air conditioned homes to huts built in the treetops, fighting insects, disease, and a host of other challenges. Most of all would be the challenge of finding out how to contact and communicate with an Indian tribe with a reputation for being violent toward outsiders[[1]](#footnote-1).

Eventually, the men built a base a short distance from the Indian village and made friendly contact with one of the Waodani Indians. What the missionaries didn’t know, however, was that the ‘friendly’ contact was a scout who would inform 10 Waodani warriors to meet them at their base and kill all 5 of the missionaries with spears.

Over the years, there has been a lot discussion over whether or not these missionaries were foolish; whether or not their lives were wasted unnecessarily. They had families to care for and they reached out to these Indians knowing their reputation for violence. But aside from that – what is clear is that these men were motivated by Jesus’ command to go and make disciples. Their tragic death came as a result of being followers of Jesus.

But what do we do with a testimony like this? Is this type of suffering something reserved for *radical* Christians, or is it something that is intrinsic to being Christian? To do that, let’s begin with a definition.

**What is persecution?**

To begin, let’s look at how the Bible speaks about it:

* **Matthew 5:11 (NIV)**  
  11 “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you *because of me*.
  + Persecution we are considering is that which comes because of our connection to Jesus.

*So what does it look like?*

* **John 15:19 (NIV)**  
  19 If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.
  + Persecution can include **hatred**
* **1 Peter 4:3-4 (NIV)**  
  3 For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. 4 They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.
  + Persecution can **include being mocked or slandered** (‘heap abuse[[2]](#footnote-2)’ is used this way).
* **Luke 21:12 (NIV)**  
  12 “But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name.”
  + Persecution can include being **betrayed and delivered** over to officials
* **Acts 22:4 (NIV)**4 “I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison,”
  + Persecution can include being **killed**.

As we scan the Scriptures, we can define Christian persecution this way: *Opposition or harassment that comes because we are Christians.* And the shape such opposition or harassment takes when we see that it can include things like being hated, mocked, slandered, betrayed, or even killed.

So when we talk about persecution this morning we mean to talk about a specific type of suffering. One reason Christian persecution is unique is because it comes with a choice. If we renounced Christ, we wouldn’t have it – it comes because we are seeking to follow Christ; it comes because of certain decisions we make based on conviction.

Loss of promotion because refusal to lie to customer like boss asked; family disowns you for becoming a Christian; peers ridicule your decision to trust in Christ as an intellectual weakness; loss of friendships because you refuse to indulge in what your non-Christian peers do; you’re kicked out of the country you gave up everything in order to plant your life there and share the gospel; you’re targeted by others opposed to Christianity and lose your life for it.

**Why is it important to persevere under persecution?**

* Because of God’s purposes in persecution. Quick review of various purposes:
  + To grow us in holiness (Ps. 119:67)
  + To build perseverance (Rom. 5:3)
  + To grow us in maturity (Ja. 1:2-4)
  + To teach us His word (Ps. 119:71)
  + To help us encourage others (2 Cor. 1:3-4)
  + To wean us off self-reliance (2 Cor. 1:8-9)

These purposes are all important, but let’s focus in on two ideas in particular:

1. **It’s important to persevere under persecution because it is a normal part of being a Christian** *– (not just for radical Christians).*
   * **2 Timothy 3:12 (NIV)**  
     “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”
     + Who? *Everyone*!
     + Why? Because following Christ is counter-cultural[[3]](#footnote-3). When Jesus came on the scene, it was like the light was turned on after a long period of darkness. How do you feel when some flips on a bright light early in the morning[[4]](#footnote-4)?
   * **Galatians 5:11 (NIV)**  
     “Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.”
     + The gospel is offensive. So long as we tell others the gospel, there will always be an offense – it tells people they are wrong, that they need to change, that they can’t do it themselves.
   * Question for class: *Okay then, if I am not facing persecution currently, does that mean I’m not being a faithful Christian?*
     + Not necessarily.
     + Could be if I’m avoiding following Jesus (e.g. evangelism) because of the cost.
     + But there are a number of examples in Scripture where faithful Christians were in a season (*note season*) of peace. Paul had times when he knew plenty (Phi. 4:12) and times of need (Phi. 4:12).
       - We need to have a *willingness/readiness* to suffer
       - We need to not be surprised when it happens[[5]](#footnote-5)
2. **It’s important to persevere because it glorifies God** 
   * **Colossians 1:24 (NIV)**  
     “Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.”
   * *What does it mean to fill up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions?*
     + *Not adding to atonement.*
       - **John 19:30** – It is finished
       - **Hebrews 10:14** “because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.”

*What is lacking in the afflictions of Christ is not that they are deficient in worth, as though they could not sufficiently cover the sins of all who believe. What is lacking is that the infinite value of Christ’s afflictions is not known and trusted in the world. When we suffer for Christ and suffer well, it leaves a watching world asking how can you have hope in those circumstances?*

* + - * **1 Peter 3:15 (NIV)**  
        “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an *answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope* that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”

**How can I be faithful under persecution? *Or how do I respond?***

Review the framework we’ve been using in the class:

1. How does this suffering challenge my view of who God is?

2. What am I tempted to trust in other than God?

3. How can I fight for faith? How do I need to rely on others in this fight?

4. How can I conduct myself so that God is glorified in my life through this difficult time?

Did you notice that Paul ‘rejoiced’ in his suffering (Colossians 1:24)? How is that possible? Consider these three truths:

1. **Rejoice knowing your reward is great – the great reversal.**
   1. **John 13:3-4 (NIV)**  
      “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; 4 so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.”
      1. Notice the three things Jesus knew: the Father had put all things under His power, where He’d come from, where He was going. Then v4 ‘*so’*. One reason He was able to serve the disciples like this then in a little while on the cross was because He knew/rested in this. The same is true for us:
         1. What we’ve been given: the earth (Matt. 5:5); the kingdom (Lk. 12:31-32)[[6]](#footnote-6). *If we’ve been given this, why would we be stingy or try to make a name for ourselves? It’s already ours.*
         2. Where we’ve come from: we were dead in our sin, made alive (Eph. 2:1). *Remembering that is humbling (2:11).*
         3. Where we’re going: to be with God.
   2. Or consider where this idea shows up in another place: **Philippians 2:12 “**Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”
      1. We are called to work out our salvation; to obey. Obedience can be costly. Why the ‘therefore’? It points us back to **2:1-11**. The ‘therefore’ in v12 means that similar to the wayJesus was exalted after humbling himself in obedience, so *will you*, at the proper time, be exalted after you humble yourself, trust God and step out in obedience. You won’t be put to shame for trusting God.
2. **Rejoice in a greater assurance**

**1 Peter 1:6-7 (NIV)**  
6 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7 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.

Notice the reason why Peter says trials have come? *To prove the genuineness of your faith.* We grow the most not through comfort but through suffering.

1. **Rejoice in an unchanging God**

As we’ve talked about in the class, there are times when we can’t see or understand th reason why God allows a specific instance of suffering, but one thing we can know, one thing that never changes is the character of the God who is sovereign over all things, including our suffering. There is no clearer place to look to see the heart of God then the cross – it’s there we gain the assurance of who He is and why we can be sure we can trust Him. Listen to **Romans 8:31-32** *“What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”*

**Conclusion**

Think back to the story of those 5 missionaries. So was it a waste? Jim Elliot, one of the missionaries who was killed by the Waodani Indians is the one who wrote “He is not fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.” He lived that way and died that way. Several of the wives who lost their husbands traveled back to the village to share the gospel with them and by God’s grace, men like Mincaye as well as other Indians would soon hear the gospel – see it lived out in the love of these women and soon be converted.

**2 Corinthians 4:8-12** (NIV)  
8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 11 For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. 12 So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

Death at work in us...but life at work in you.

Persecution is an example of the suffering we *choose* – not because we are masochists who like suffering but because we are committed to following Christ more than our comfort. It’s a suffering we choose because it is worth it – worth the glory God receives; worth the life God works in others because of it.

1. “Auca”, or the Waodani Indians, is a Quichua word for ‘savage’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Βλασφημέω [blasphémeó] - *slander, revile, defame, speak irreverently/impiously/disrespectfully of or about* (BDAG) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See 1 Pet. 4:3-4 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “The light has come into the world and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. Everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light lest his works should be exposed” (**John 3:19-20**). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 1 Peter 4:12 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Luke 12:32“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.” He then goes on to tell them to sell their possessions and be generous knowing this. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)