

**Core Seminar**

**Discipling**

**Class 10: Discipling People who Are Hurting**

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# Introduction Picture these situations:

* A close friend calls, his wife just died in a tragic accident.
* One of the members of your small group just got fired from work.
* Your wife suffers with chronic pain that affects everything she does.
* A young wife comes to your door in tears. Her husband has just packed up and said he is leaving her.

How do you respond to these situations? What do you do? What do you say? What do you pray? How do you pray for this person? Where do you go in Scripture? How do you bring comfort?

We live in a fallen world that often brings pain, difficulty and suffering. In order to be a good discipler, it’s important to think through how to minister to those who are hurting.

While our study today won’t be comprehensive, I hope it will be a good *introduction* to the topic.

What we are thinking about today is what theologians refer to as *a theology of suffering*. In studying a theology of suffering, we forced to ask a few questions:

* How do I understand suffering?
* How does my view of suffering shape my faith?
* Are any of my thoughts on suffering unbiblical?
* How does my views on suffering shape the way I care for others?

For most people (including many Christians!), a general rule of thumb is to seek pleasure and to avoid pain at all costs. Yet, what we find in Scripture is that God uses suffering as a means to help us grow closer to him and to bring him great glory. John Piper writes:

“We must talk so as to make suffering seem normal and purposeful, and not surprising in this fallen age. The forces of American culture are almost all designed to build the opposite worldview into our minds. Maximize comfort, ease, and security. Avoid all choices that might bring discomfort, trouble, difficulty, pain, or suffering. Add this cultural force to our natural desire for immediate gratification and fleeting pleasures, and the combined power to undermine the superior satisfaction of the soul in the glory of God through suffering is huge.” (John Piper, *Counseling Suffering People*, JBC, Winter 2003)

# What does the Bible say about suffering?

* **The Bible is realistic and honest about suffering in a fallen world.** It does not paint a “rosy” picture of the Christian life, but is straightforward about the difficulties we face as believers (Gen 3:16-19; 2 Peter 3:8-22; 4:12-19).
* **God is totally sovereign and totally good** (Isa 40; Luke 18:19)**.** We know from Scripture this is true, though in difficult times our intellect or feelings lead us to deny this. Our minds ask, “Why does a good God let bad things happen to good people?” Our feelings signal to us how much we are hurting, and consequently doubt God’s goodness. Truth is truth, even when we are struggling. That’s a reality we need to grab hold of RIGHT NOW. Rather than denying God, we need to cry out to God. Crying out to God is a way of acknowledging his sovereignty and goodness, even in the midst of confusion and pain. The Cross (Christ’s death for us) is in fact the ultimate evidence of God’s sovereignty (Acts 4:27-28) and goodness (Romans 5:8).
* At the same time, **man is sinful and responsible for his actions** (Rom 3:23; Gal 6; Phil 2:12-13)**.** Sin comes from man, not from God. To say contrary would be blasphemy against a Holy God. Man has full responsibility for the sinful choices he makes. Solomon describes how the fool reaps folly on his own head by the life he lives.
* **God uses everything for His good purposes.** Men and women make sinful choices that hurt themselves and others, and reap difficulties in their own life and the life of others. God uses everything (including our foolish decision and their consequences) for his good purposes (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28).
* **God builds good things into the lives of His children, even through difficult circumstances.** Difficult circumstances are not pleasant. The pain is real and it is not enjoyable. Consequently, people often interpret suffering as punishment from God. Yet, Scripture says that God uses suffering to shape and mold his children. We are to not lose heart because our suffering produces “a harvest of righteousness and peace” for those who are trained by it (Hebrews 12:5-11).
* **How should we respond to suffering as Christians: Turn to God, not away from Him.** [Chapliancy examples.] For those who are undergoing hardships, there are lots of questions that must be sorted through, like “What do we do to make things better?” or “Why is this happening?” Yet, the most fundamental question a person can ask and answer is: “*Who* do we turn to in the midst of our suffering?” We must trust in God’s sovereign goodness (Ps 42:5,11; 56:3).

# What are God’s Purposes in Suffering?

# In a world that typically lives for pleasure and avoids pain, Christians must fight the tendency to avoid suffering. Suffering is not meaningless. God has purposes for our suffering. We certainly can’t understand all of God’s purposes for suffering, but we can understand a few because they are revealed in Scripture.

# Suffering gives us an opportunity to stand out as Christians in a world that does not honor God. We should count it a privilege to suffer as a Christian; there should be no shame in it. “If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name” (1 Peter 4:16).

# Suffering teaches us to rely on God, not on ourselves. What suffering often does to us is it peels away all of the superficial layers of our life, much like an onion peeled to its core. What we find when we get to our core is the ugliness and treachery of our sin; we don’t want to trust God or build our lives around him. We want to be self-dependent and self-reliant. Yet, suffering teaches us to turn away from our self-dependence and to turn to God instead. “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia…this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead” (2 Corinthians 1:8-9).

# Suffering teaches us God’s decrees. “It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.” (Psalm 119:71).

# Suffering matures us into godly people the Lord is molding for himself. “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work, so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4).

# The Savior receives glory through our suffering. “But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed” (1 Peter 4:13).

# Suffering even allows us to share in the Son’s glory. “Now if we are children then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (Romans 8:17).

It is God’s prerogative to permit suffering. Pain can be meaningless, or it can be meaningful. Consider this for a moment: God could have chosen to leave us in our pain, and to make nothing of it. Yet, out of his mercy, and because pain is not beyond God’s sovereignty, He uses suffering to bring greater glory for himself and to shape us to look more like himself.

It is our *privilege and joy* to partake in suffering, since God receives glory through it.

[PAUSE FOR QUESTIONS]

**How do we prepare our discIpling friends for suffering?**

The best time to learn about suffering is not in the middle of a crisis. The best way to prepare someone for suffering is to think through a theology of suffering *when times are good*.

* **Take some time to talk about suffering.** Typically, in our discipling relationships, we only talk about difficulties when we are experiencing suffering. Don’t wait until suffering comes to finally talk about it. If you are discipling someone, make it a priority to talk about suffering *before it comes*. We know that everyone will undergo some suffering (to greater or lesser degrees) in their lifetime. So it is not a matter of *if* suffering will come, but *when*.
* **Help them to deconstruct worldly assumptions about suffering.** For most Christians, there are some worldly assumptions that influence their thoughts on suffering. Help them to *disentangle* the worldly assumptions from their suffering. For example: We mentioned earlier how people assume that suffering is a bad thing. Help them to realize this is contrary to Scripture; suffering is a normal part of the Christian life.
* **Study God’s purposes for suffering as revealed in his Word.** Why? You are more capable of assigning godly meaning to suffering in midst of the difficulties if you have taken the time *beforehand* to study God’s purposes as it is revealed in Scripture.
* **Study suffering using good Christian articles and books.** Because Christian authors have wrestled with this topic for hundreds of years, there are a lot of good things written on the subject. Two book recommendations: Steve Estes and Joni Erickson Tada’s *When God Weeps* or Don Carson’s *How Long Oh Lord?*
* **Build the relationship(s) before suffering comes.** As a discipler, you can better get to know the person when things are not so difficult—you can explore more of their life, get to know strengths and weakness, and learn about them when things are good. If you build the relationship in good times, you’ll have a foundation from which to work when things are difficult.
* **Focus on faith.** Remind them that troubles will come and they should prepare to respond to them in faith (John 16:33).
* **Help build a foundation on the goodness and sovereignty of God.** When Christians struggle with suffering, whether they realize it or not, often what they are doing is doubting God’s character (Luke 6:47-48). Either they are doubting God’s goodness or his sovereignty or both. You can help prepare people for suffering by building into them a firm understanding of God’s character, particularly his goodness and sovereignty. One of the best things you can do as a discipler is to study the character of God with your Christian friend, not just for the sake of preparing for suffering, but because it will help them with their entire Christian life.
* **Teach them to meditate on the gospel.** Before suffering comes, build into them the habit of regularly turning to and meditating on the truths of the gospel. Help them to remember that God sent his son to suffer on their behalf.

**How can we help our discipling friends when times are difficult?**

* As the discipler *and member of the same church*, you should **accept your *covenant* responsibility to partake in their suffering**. Our covenant says, “We will rejoice at each other’s happiness and endeavor with tenderness and sympathy to bear each other’s burdens and sorrows.” By accepting membership in this church, you have accepted the responsibility to care for those who are suffering. Paul writes: “… so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it” (1 Cor 12:25-26). If one person struggles, we don’t all *literally* feel his pain, but all of us *should* show concern for him. (Practically speaking, in a church of 800, we can’t all show concern with the same level of involvement; some will be *directly* involved, while others stay in the background and pray.)
* **Be present when suffering comes.** Don’t let people go through suffering alone. Despite many of their foolish comments, we must still give Job’s friends credit for the way they cared for him at the outset of his trials. When they came to him, they became greatly distressed over Job’s suffering. After an initial wailing and tearing of their clothes, they followed Jewish custom and sat with him in silence for seven days and nights. Why? The text says: “No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was” (Job 2:13). Your presence in the midst of suffering is a powerful means for caring for others.

*[Story: If there is time, tell the hospital story about the trucker and wife who lost their baby. He wailed like a baby after the nurse brought the dead child in and let them hold the child, and I sat in silence for a long time, and didn’t know what to say. Eventually I prayed for them and left. I felt incompetent and useless because I sat in silence for a long time and didn’t know what to say. Later on, I found out how much it meant to them that I simply sat with them in the midst of their sorrow.]*

* **Be an ambassador of comfort.** You have a duty to show comfort to others because God has first shown comfort to you. Paul writes: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us, in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Cor 1:3-4). Do not hoard the comfort you have received. God comforts you, so that you can comfort others. / How have we been comforted? By the gospel. God sent his son to die for our sins, so that we did not have to bear the wrath that we deserved. What good news that is to our ears! How comforting that should be for our hearts! God has cared for us by making the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf—by sending his son to die for us.
* **Be willing to make sacrifices for others** (Gal 6:10)**.** Suffering never seems to come at a convenient time. You can’t schedule a crisis in your blackberry and hope it conveniently fits within the time allotted. Often, difficult situations crop up when you don’t have the time to devote to others. So, it will more than likely require you as a discipler to make sacrifices in your time in order to care for a struggling person.
* **Gently instruct in difficulty but mainly comfort in crisis.** In the midst of a difficult situation, people can quickly get overwhelmed with emotions, and can get confused about what to do. Gently and graciously instruct them and guide them if they need the help. But your main objective is to show comfort in a midst of a crisis.
* **Reaffirm God’s character: Talk about God’s mercy and goodness** (2 Sam 24:14; Ps 34:8)**.** In the midst of their struggles, people often search for answers to difficult questions: “Why is my son dying of cancer?” “Why did my husband have to die of a heart attack now?” “Why did I lose my job; doesn’t God care?” *Don’t get drawn into abstract, theoretical discussion about theology* (i.e., Don’t try to explain the problem of evil and how a good God could allow evil to persist). Focus you conversation on reaffirming the character of God and their need to trust in his mercy and goodness.
* **Don’t try to explain what you do not know.** With some of these “why” question, you may not have a good answer. Don’t feel like you need to make up an answer or else you have failed in your Christian discipling. It is okay to say, “I don’t know.” And, then focus your answers, as best you can, on the foundational truths that have been revealed to us in Scripture. Rather than trying to give answers for questions that you do not know, answer with what you do know: the Gospel. In their suffering, remind them of great gospel truths like, the merciful and loving character of God; the all sufficient sacrifice of the suffering Savior on our behalf; etc.
* **Truth is always true and sin is always sin** (Jer 10:10-11; Rom 6:23)**.** In the midst of a crisis, the black and white of truth and sin can sometimes become gray. Sometimes, people can start to reconstruct their theology of suffering in the midst of a crisis. When that happens, be sure to stand firm on what you know is true and what you know is a lie.
* **Pray with them and/or for them.** Oneof the most comforting things you can do for a person is to pray *for* them in the midst of their struggles. They might not know how to pray because they are overwhelmed by their struggles. Pray words of comfort. Let your prayers also be instructive, directing their mind and heart toward truths that might be hard to focus on in the middle of their struggle. For believers who are able to, offer to pray *with* them. It is an encouragement to pray together and to go before the God’s throne together (Eph 1:15-23).
* **Think practically how to serve them, especially in the midst of a crisis** (Gal 6:13)**.** One of the first questions you can ask when a person is going through a struggle or crisis is, “What can I do to help you?” Think practically when it comes to giving help to a person who is struggling.

*[Two examples: (1) Timmy getting Dad’s car after the heart attack. Right after my dad died, Timmy showed up and asked what he can do to help. He realized that dad’s car was still waiting in Newark, and he rescued it just minutes before it was going to be towed away. (2) The church member who answered the phone for the pastor who killed someone in a car accident. The woman showed up at the pastor’s home and offered to deal with the onslaught of phone calls that she knew would quickly come once word spread through the church.]*

* **Don’t be scared to ask for outside help.** As a discipler, there are going to be times when you will be overwhelmed by your discipling friend’s difficulties. Don’t be sacred to seek outside counsel (especially from pastors, or from other godly members), and to draw others in if you are not sure how to help. A feeling of being overwhelmed, or the fact that others have more knowledge on how to help a specific problem, both can be indicators that you should seek outside help.

**In Conclusion –**

* Discipling people who are hurting starts when times are good by building a solid foundation for difficult times that WILL come.
* Dealing with difficulty and crisis takes discernment, lots of prayer, gentleness and comfort, and a willingness to help.
* Praise God for the privilege we have to point others who are suffering to the goodness and mercy of God.