

**Core Seminar**

**Suffering for the Glory of God**

**Class 2: God’s Revealed Purposes for Suffering**

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***How God can use suffering for our good and His glory***

1. **Introduction**

This morning, we’ll be looking at the purposes for suffering that God’s revealed.

And so this is a very dangerous class. If we’re not careful, you could walk out in forty-five minutes quite damaged spiritually. Let me explain:

This class is dangerous because . . . well, when I suggest that God’s revealed his purposes for our suffering, you could easily think that you should *always* understand God’s purposes for your suffering. That’s the first way this class could be dangerous. Just think for a moment how often you’ve heard someone in a difficult predicament say something like “I just don’t understand why God would let this happen to me.” Now, sometimes that’s a cry of faith—of trusting bewilderment at God’s good purposes. But quite often, it’s an accusation against God, suggesting that if he was the God described in the Bible, we wouldn’t be hurting like we are. That unless we can understand *why*, we don’t deserve to suffer.

But as you’ll recall from last week, the main thrust of the Bible’s dealing with suffering is *not* a call to understand, but a call to trust. So we’re taught who God is—and on the basis of that evidence we’re called to trust in the midst of trial.

We’re told in **Isaiah 55:8-9,**

“My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Our comfort isn’t the degree to which we can understand God’s purposes, but the degree to which we can trust our Savior. And “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (**Heb. 13:8**).

That’s the first way in which this class might be dangerous. We might think we have a right to understand God’s purposes for our suffering.

But there’s a second way this class might be dangerous. Let’s pretend for a moment that I’m able to explain God’s purposes not just in general, and not just for some of life’s challenges, but for *all* suffering. Let’s say that you walked away from this class with an encyclopedic knowledge of why God allows pain in your life. What then? Would you have to exercise faith in the midst of suffering? No. You’d get fired from your job, but you’d know “God is allowing this to happen because in a moment I’m going to have a conversation with Sue, who didn’t get fired, and she’s going to see how little this has rattled me, and she’s going to ask me why, and I’m going to share the gospel, and then she’s going to go back to her sister-in-law who’s been sharing the gospel with her and ask some more questions, and God’s going to use that to lead her to faith even though I’ll never see Sue again until heaven.”

And it all makes sense. Exit faith.

But, as Hebrews says, “without faith it is impossible to please God.”

So we need to see God’s purposes for suffering as revealed in his word not as a substitute for faith, but as evidence for faith. Not a body of knowledge I can use to hypothesize God’s purposes for a particular trial until I’m pretty sure why he let it happen so I can be OK with it. But a series of categories helping me understand *in general* why God allows suffering that help me trust that help me trust his unknown purposes for *my particular* suffering.

So we use these purposes for suffering not as explanation, but as evidence to help us trust God. (Story of Lucas’ birth and the problem with God’s goodness evidenced as “it could have been worse.”)

And there’s one last danger in this class. Normally, it’s really unhelpful to tell people why they’re suffering. In the midst of tragedy, be very careful before you ask “*What do you think God is teaching you in this*?” (which turns their suffering into a solvable riddle). Be very careful before you say, “*I understand what you’re going through*” (which of course you don’t – every situation has unique complexities). Sometimes, a simple question of how to pray and a hug are the best ways to support our suffering friends.

So with that in mind, we’ll begin the rest of our time by considering the astonishing claim the Bible makes that suffering is a *gift*—and then look at eight different purposes that God, in His wisdom, has given us for suffering.

1. **Suffering is a Gift!?**

Paul writes in **Philippians 1:29** “For it has *been granted* to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.” Understanding that we have been *granted* *faith* to trust in Christ (Eph. 2:8) is one thing – we understand that at one point we were dead in our sins, hostile to God and refusing to seek after Him[[1]](#footnote-1). But *granted* to *suffer* for Him? Why in the world would Paul consider suffering on behalf of Christ to be a gift—much less a gift on the same level as our faith?

Well, a good place to start in understanding this is Jesus’ own promise that we would suffer. **Luke 9:23**. “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

For a first century audience, to take up your cross wouldn’t mean bearing up with an annoying roommate or a stubbed toe or a fussy child. It would mean you’re on your way to die. When a Christian takes up their cross, they have come to an end of themselves (no matter how costly it might be) in order to follow Jesus. But that’s the key. We suffer, we sacrifice, *in order to follow Jesus*. Continue on in Luke 9. “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?” (9:24-25). Christianity is *not* ascetic. We never, ever, ever suffer for the sake of suffering, or sacrifice as an end in itself. We always give up in order to take hold of what is better.

We suffer to take hold of something better. That’s why suffering is a gift. But what is it that we take hold of? That brings us to God’s purposes in suffering. I’ll give you eight. Your job? Listen to all eight. And pick one or two where, as you consider your own attitude toward suffering, you think you need a better understanding of that category of God’ purposes.

1. **God’s revealed purposes**
   1. *To grow us in holiness*

David writes in **Psalm 119:67,** “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.” God in His kindness will sometimes use suffering to get our attention and wake us up to sin’s deception in our lives. We know that for the Christian, suffering is never God’s condemnation. “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,” Romans 8:1. But suffering can be God’s blessing to wake us up. “Pain,” as C.S. Lewis describes it, “insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.[[2]](#footnote-2)”

* 1. *To build perseverance*

The Christian life is a race that calls for perseverance (Heb. 12:1). We are responsible to “continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel” (**Col. 1:23a**), and we can only do that by the preserving grace of God[[3]](#footnote-3). Now how does God give us grace to persevere? We know that God will never allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear. (1 Cor 10:13). But have you ever considered that the normal way he does that, the normal way he gives us grace to bear up under temptation is not to send some mystical strength in the moment, but to *strengthen* us through prior trials. In **Romans 5:3**, Paul reminds us, “We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance.”

So that temptation you’ll experience a year from now? Maybe the difficulty you’re suffering through today is how God will persevere you through that future trial. We need perseverance to finish the race, and trial is a main way that God grows our perseverance.

* 1. *To grow us in maturity*

When we turn to James, we find the same idea of perseverance as we did in Romans: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance” (**Jas. 1:2-3**). But perseverance isn’t an end in itself; he goes on to write, “Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (**Jas. 1:4**).

Over time, experiencing the sufficiency of God’s preserving grace leads to hope - not in ourselves, but in God. “Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character hope” (**Rom. 5:3b-4**). We will, as Paul instructs, increasingly *know* what it means to “be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power” (**Eph. 6:10**). And in His mighty power, we lack nothing!

Do you want to become useful to God? Do you want to have strength of faith? Do you want to be rooted and sound in your Christian walk? These things happen as we understand God’s word. Now, we all know the difference between knowing something up here in our heads and really acting on it down here in our hearts. So often, it seems, the thing that takes head knowledge of God’s word and fuses it into our hearts—that makes it instinctual—is adversity. Through adversity we see God’s promises tested—and prevail. We *experience* his faithfulness. Adversity seems to be one of God’s primary tools for developing maturity. (Story of what Keen said during engagement.)

* 1. *To teach us His word*

David writes in Psalm 119, “It was good for me to be afflicted, *so that*, I might learn Your decrees” (**Ps. 119:71**). Isn’t that incredible! Suffering is one way that we come to understand the Bible. Why is that? Sometimes it’s because suffering is what softens our hearts so that we don’t just hear, but listen. As Richard Baxter put it, “Suffering so unbolts the door of the heart, that the Word hath easier entrance.[[4]](#footnote-4)” It’s one thing to *read*  about God’s comfort; quite another to experience it. God in His kindness often uses difficulties in our lives to teach us his Word. Now of course that assumes that we don’t miss what he’s teaching us. So it’s no surprise that James follows his amazing exhortation in James 1 to “consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds” with an encouragement to ask God for wisdom “who gives generously to all without finding fault.” And the promise that we will receive the wisdom we ask for. So times of trial teach us God’s word; we should ask Him for the wisdom to not miss what He is teaching.

* 1. *To help us encourage others*

**2 Corinthians 1:3-4** “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.”

Isn’t that amazing. Why does God comfort us? So that we can comfort others. Suffering might make a promise in Scripture come alive, which we can share with others (Rom. 15:4). It might give us a more empathetic heart. We might encourage others by our own experience of suffering, reminding them that they’re not alone (1 Pet. 5:9).

And did you notice that word “any” in 2 Corinthians 1:4? “so that we can comfort those in *any* trouble.” We shouldn’t be reluctant to comfort others from our experience even when their tragedy seems far greater than ours.

* 1. *To wean us off self-reliance*

**2 Corinthians 1:8b-9** “We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.”

We all need that, don’t we? To “not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.” I don’t particularly enjoy those dark nights of the soul. I’m sure you don’t either. But God can use them to drive us out of ourselves and into the love of God. John Piper writes, “I have never heard anyone say, ‘The really deep lessons of life have come through times of ease and comfort.’ But I have heard strong saints say, ‘Every significant advance I have ever made in grasping the depths of God’s love and growing deep with Him, has come through suffering.[[5]](#footnote-5)’”

Isn’t it interesting, then, what so often happens. Suffering is uncomfortable because we’re out of control. We want to get to the other side as fast as possible so that we can be comfortable again. Translation. Suffering forces us to walk by faith and that’s really uncomfortable. So we want to get to the other side as fast as possible so we can walk by sight again. Which is much more comfortable.

And we end up trying to flee the very thing God is doing in our suffering. So in trial, remind yourself that this is a time to lean on God—and that is a good thing.

* 1. *To strengthen our assurance*

This purpose may sound odd at first since our inclination may be to think that suffering would threaten our confidence in Christ. But think of what the writer of Hebrews says: “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons” (**Heb. 12:7-8**).

A mark of true conversion is not that we’ve “prayed the prayer” or “walked the aisle” but that we persevere (Col. 1:23). A person may profess to be a Christian because it was culturally acceptable, a way to meet new friends, pleasing to the parents – yet never be converted. Yet suffering tests the genuineness of our faith. It gives evidence of whether our faith is real or self-serving. **1 Peter 1:6-7** “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 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.”

* 1. *To glorify God*

How is God glorified in our suffering? When all the apparent ‘perks’ of following Christ are gone and all that remains is the promise of persecution, and still the Christian *chooses* Christ, *then* He is glorified. We choose him because he’s worth more than what we give up. And that brings him glory.

Moses understood this: “By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He *chose to be mistreated* along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of *greater value* than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward” (**Heb. 11:24-26**) Moses made the economically rational decision to choose the thing of bigger value. He chose Christ. Not the treasures of Egypt. And that showed how much Christ was worth.

That’s why Peter reminds us that we need “be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (**1 Pet. 3:15**). Peter was writing to readers who were suffering and knew that when the world watches someone suffer *yet still have hope*, there’s gonna be questions! The only answer is that our hope is not ultimately in what this world has to offer, but in God. He is our reward (Heb. 11:6); He is our inheritance (1 Pet. 1:3-4). He is worth so much more than what the world values.

"Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." (**Psalm 73:25-26**)

1. **Testimony: Artair Rogers**
2. **Conclusion: *Two Thoughts***

Even though the Bible’s answer to suffering is primarily one of faith rather than understanding, the Bible still gives us many, many examples of how God works good through suffering. I don’t know about you, but as I’ve gone through this list—and as I turn from one purpose to the next to the next—knowing that these eight are just the beginning, I’m quite overwhelmed at God’s mercy in turning our suffering to good.

So how do we use a class like this? What is the purpose of knowing God’s purpose, so to speak? Two final thoughts for you.

* 1. **Avoid the danger of *needing to know.***

First, remember that your lack of understanding is in no way a reason not to trust. Proverbs says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and *lean not on your own understanding*; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight" (**Proverbs 3:5-6**). We can trust God because He has revealed *who* He is, not because He explains every detail of what He is doing. So use these purposes for suffering as a reason to trust, not as a substitute for trusting. God’s revealed purposes for suffering help us recognize the good he has worked through past suffering—which helps us trust him in the future. And while we may not be able to look at present difficulty and identify God’s purposes, the sheer volume and specificity of these categories certainly help us trust that, even if we are blind to it, God is using this for our good.

* 1. **Praise God for the mercy of revelation**

And a second way to use this class: turn it into praise. Isn’t it amazing how much God’s told us about how he uses suffering? He understands our weakness, and he has lavished his mercy on us through his word to help us trust when times are hard. Isn’t it amazing his ability to turn the very worst into the very best? The trap of the Red Sea into an eternal monument to his power. The tragedy of Naomi into the blessing of King David. The crucifixion of the only innocent man who ever lived into our eternal salvation. Praise God for all that we’ve seen today.

QUESTIONS?

1. Eph. 2:1; Rom. 8:7, 3:11 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Problem of Pain* by C.S. Lewis, pg. 91 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Phi. 1:6; Jn. 10:28; Rom. 8:29-30 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Richard Baxter, “The Cure of Melancholy and Overmuch Sorrow, by Faith.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Desiring God* by John Piper, pg. 222 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)