

**Core Seminar**

**Suffering for the Glory of God**

**Class 4: God’s Grief over Suffering**

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***The empathy of a suffering God***

1. **Introduction**

As he watched wave after wave of young men return wounded from the horrors of World War I, Edward Shillito, a British pastor, wrote these words:

The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God’s wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.

Look at the title for our class this morning. “God’s Grief Over Suffering: The Empathy of a Suffering God.” Of all the gods worshipped in this world, only one is a God who has suffered. That is at the same time the grand absurdity and the grand wonder of the Christian faith. We serve a God who’s suffered. He’s walked that road. He understands. He knows us. His sufferings bring comfort in our weakness.

**Question: how does the fact that Christ suffered help us in our own suffering?**

In the first three weeks of this class, we laid out a logical framework for thinking through suffering. God doesn’t owe an explanation for suffering; instead he’s called us to faith. Week 1. The many purposes we see for suffering in the Bible and the reality of heaven and hell—weeks 2 and 3—are grist for that faith. But, I’ll admit, these answers while rock solid can feel hard and stern when they rub against the very human condition of suffering. So today we turn to the empathy of our suffering God because as we learn how well he understands us, we can trust him all the more.

As we explore this topic, we’ll begin with a brief look at the substance of that suffering in the person of Jesus Christ. And then we’ll take time to unpack Hebrews 4, which says that because of his suffering Christ *understands* us—and 1 Peter 2, that gives Christ’s suffering as an *example*.

1. **The Cross: Where Love *and* Justice Meet**

So how has God suffered? In the person of Jesus Christ, most supremely at the cross. He suffered and died a horrible death in our place so that God could show mercy to sinners. For the rest of this class, we’ll talk about how we can experience the mercy of God—because when we suffer, what we need is mercy. But first we need to recognize that God’s mercy—to us as sinners—could never come without Christ’s suffering on the cross. God’s just, right? And we’ve sinned against him. That means we deserve his punishment, not his mercy. So how do we get mercy?

2 Corinthians 5:21 puts it like this: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”[[1]](#footnote-1) [Explain.]

Jesus didn’t simply suffer as an example or as an inspiration—though both are true. He suffered in our place. He suffered what we deserved. And so his suffering as a substitute purchases our ability to even consider his suffering as a source of comfort and as an example. It purchases our ability to even consider the rest of his class. Because of Jesus’ suffering, our own suffering can make us fit for heaven—rather than simply being a down payment on hell.

Most importantly, Jesus’ suffering was for us. But beyond that, it offers us both comfort and example, which we’ll turn to for the remainder of our time together this morning.

1. **Comfort in God’s Empathy**

One aspect of suffering that can feel unbearable is the sense that we are alone. Solomon writes “Two are better than one…For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!” (**Ecc. 4:9a, 10**). Think of what suffering is like when no one understands, no one’s been through it before, no one who can help you up.

Yet, no matter how alone we may feel in are suffering, when we come to the cross, we find a God who can empathize. Just a quick primer on the English language: sympathy is when you feel for someone. But empathy is when you know from experience what they’re going through. And the amazing thing about the Christian God is that he not just sympathizes—that would be incredible in and of itself. But he empathizes. Here’s what we read in Hebrews 4:

**14**Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven,Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. **15**For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. **16**Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (NIV)

In His incarnation, Jesus walks in our shoes. And so he is able to help us when we are suffering.

John Stott helps us here with a highly fictional image of billions of people seated before God’s throne. He writes: “Some shrank back, but others objected. ‘Can God judge us? How can He know about suffering?’ snapped one woman who had suffered in a Nazi concentration camp. ‘We endured terror…beatings…torture…death!’ Others agreed. What did God know of weeping, hunger and hatred? God leads a sheltered life in heaven, they said. Someone from Hiroshima, people born deformed, others murdered, each sent forward a leader. They concluded that before God could judge them, He should have to endure suffering as they did and pronounced a sentence:

*Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Let his close friends betray him. Let him face false charges. Let a prejudiced jury try him and a cowardly judge convict him. Let him be tortured. Let him be utterly alone. Then, bloody and forsaken, let him die.*

The room grew silent after the sentence against God had been pronounced. No one moved, and a weight fell on each face. For suddenly, all knew that God already had served his sentence[[2]](#footnote-2).”

Going back to the fuller passage from Hebrews that you see in your handout, let me take it in four pieces so that we can see exactly how God’s empathy in our suffering brings comfort.

1. Jesus understands our weakness. So much of the difficulty of suffering comes when we feel that God is asking us to do more than what is humanly possible. But guess what? God became a human! He understands. That’s the beauty of the incarnation. There are lots of practical applications of this. But here’s one you may not have thought of: use this to read the Psalms in a fresh way.

As one writer has put it, virtually every Psalm is either about the Messiah or bythe Messiah[[3]](#footnote-3). And so they say things that go beyond what any human author had ever experienced. Psalm 1, for example: “his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.” Surely no one but Jesus could ever had said that. Or Psalm 22, words that were written for Jesus to use: “They have pierced my hands and my feet—I can count all my bones—they stare and gloat over me” . . . “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Many of the Psalms describe the suffering of Jesus. Use them to walk through your own suffering as the words of the one who has walked before. Jesus was weak, and through the Psalms he explores faith in weakness.

1. Jesus was tempted in every way that we are. Hebrews 4 *doesn’t* say that Jesus has suffered in every way that we have. But he has been tempted in every way. And if suffering is most essentially a struggle for faith, and faith is a struggle against temptation, that means that Jesus has experienced the crux of every trial you will ever face. Let’s say that your boyfriend breaks up with you. Has Jesus experienced that suffering? No. But what is the sharp edge of that trial? It’s your struggle to trust a God who just took away in a moment all that you hoped for in that relationship. Who just quenched your dreams and your happiness. Now—was Jesus tempted in that way? Most certainly. Just think of what was behind his tears in Gethsemane.

So use that to trust his wisdom in your suffering. Does he call you to be abandoned? Persecuted? Crushed? He has experienced all that and more. He knows exactly what he is doing, and knows exactly how it feels. Trust him.

1. Yet without sin. Tempted in every way yet without sin. Jesus never gave in. In fact, he’s been tempted in ways we never have, because temptation ceases the moment we give in. But Jesus never gave in.
2. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence. What’s the application of these first three truths? Perseverance in prayer. Remember Romans 8:26—“the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.” Remember that the Spirit who intercedes for you is the same God who suffered for you at the cross.

And what’s the point of all of this? Look back to verse 14: “let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.” Suffering is a battle for faith. And God’s empathy toward us in our suffering is comfort that helps us to trust. Tim Keller puts it well. “If we…ask the question: ‘Why does God allow evil and suffering to continue?’ and we look at the cross of Jesus, we still do not know what the answer is. However, we know what the answer isn’t. It can’t be that he doesn’t love us. It can’t be that He is indifferent or detached from our condition. God takes our misery and suffering *so* seriously that he was willing to take it on himself…So, if we embrace the Christian teaching that Jesus is God and that he went to the Cross, then we have deep consolation and strength to face the brutal realities of life on earth[[4]](#footnote-4).”

At the Cross, we see what kind of God we are trusting – a God who understands. He’s not cold and indifferent. In fact, Psalm 56 says, he cares so much that he counts every toss and turn at night and catches each and every tear in a bottle[[5]](#footnote-5).

1. **Jesus’ Suffering is an Example for Us**

In 1 Peter 2:20-24 we read this:

“**20**if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. **21**For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. **22**He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. **23**When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. **24**He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”

Now, as I mentioned before, Jesus is not *primarily* an example for us to follow. That’s what we see in the last verse of this passage. Christ’s death was substitutionary. But it *is* alsoan example for us to follow.

In particular in this passage, he’s an example in three ways.

1. He committed no sin. How often are we tempted to sin while suffering? Your boss unfairly pins a failed project on you and the next day you see his windows open in the parking lot as it begins to rain. What would it mean to love your enemy? And you’re thinking: “look—I’ve taken this in a pretty Christian way so far. Can’t I just ignore that?” But that’s not what Jesus did, is it? “He committed no sin.”
2. No deceit was found in his mouth. Truth-telling in suffering is crucial. We must learn to tell the truth about ourselves, about our accusers, and about God. All three of these are hard. In suffering we need to speak the truth about ourselves—admitting our own sin and the fact that at least some of our suffering is our own fault. Second, in suffering we need to speak the truth about our enemies. When we’ve been wronged, it’s easy to exaggerate, isn’t it? To demonize others to make things look as outrageous to others as they feel to us. Now, sparking that kind of outrage might make me feel better for a time. But if it comes at the expense of the truth, all we will have succeeded in doing is distorting the perspective of a friend who could actually help me. And third, we need to speak the truth about God.

The Psalms are a wonderful example of what it looks like to ask agonized questions—and yet not accuse God of evil. Speaking truth about God to ourselves and others requires self-discipline and a good friend to correct us. And it is vitally important.

1. He did not retaliate. He didn’t even threaten, 1 Peter says. There are a million little ways that we can retaliate when we’re suffering. A million little ways that we can punish others and that we can think we’re punishing God. But in suffering, Jesus is our example of one who suffered without retaliation. He left vengeance to God.

That’s quite a standard, isn’t it! But keep in mind that Jesus’ example isn’t another law to follow, but a pointer to what is best for us. If you suffer as he did, you will be glad for it. Jesus’ example points to freedom and joy. And so, just like in our chapter in Hebrews, we see all of this summed up in faith. “Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” How do we not sin in suffering? How do we not lie? How do we not retaliate? We trust God. When I’m in a fight with my spouse, when I’m being persecuted for my faith, when I’m struggling not to look at pornography, when I’m mourning the loss of a friend—I need to trust that all of this has been carefully measured out for me by my loving Savior. And for all the things Jesus suffered, we can rejoice in the fact that though He suffered the wrath of God for our sin, we never will.

1. **Conclusion**

So let’s put all three of these pieces together. Let’s say that I’m being slandered by my neighbor. And with that suffering comes a host of temptations. Temptation to slander back, to defend myself in a sinful way, to be embittered against God for allowing this, just to name three. How does the cross help me here? (1) I remember that what I need in my temptation is both justice and mercy: justice for the evil I’m suffering and mercy to help me through it. And Jesus purchased a just God’s mercy for me at the cross. (2) I need to remember that Jesus was tempted in every way I am. He knows exactly what I’m going through. And beyond that, he was slandered himself. So I read about Jesus being slandered in Matthew 26 and picture what he went through. Put him in the words of Psalm 7 where David describes the slander he experienced with words that Jesus later took for himself. And live his world for a bit. As you understand Jesus’ experience, consider how well he understands your present trial, and be encouraged in your prayer for deliverance—maybe even using that prayer in Psalm 7. Then, as your trust in God’s providential care increases through understanding his empathy in your suffering, turn and look to Jesus as an example. If you trust that he knows what he’s doing, you’ll be able to control that inner rebellious streak that wants to act out. If you trust that what he’s doing is good, you’ll speak the truth about him and about your own complicity in this matter. If you trust that your good God is completely in control, you’ll leave vengeance to him and face each day with humility, able to seek the good that God intends for you to do in this difficulty rather than being consumed with defending yourself.

We’ll conclude with a thought from John Stott:

I could never believe in God, if it were not for the cross…In the real world of pain, how could one worship a god who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in light of his.[[6]](#footnote-6)

1. Hebrews 2:14-18 is a fitting explanation of this in light of where we’ll go with Hebrews 4 later in the class. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Cross of Christ* by John Stott, pg. 327 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Charles Drew, *The Ancient Love Song: Finding Christ in the Old Testament* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *The Reason for God,* by Tim Keller, pg. 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ps. 56:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *The Cross of Christ,* by John Stott, pgs. 335-336 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)