

Class #4: Suffering [*Sufferology*]

The longing for relief: seeking to refocus the goal, purpose & perspective in and through suffering

Sunday, January 27, 2019 | Geoff Kirkland

"Do not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises."

–Hebrews 6:12

"I die every day"

– Paul (1 Cor 15:31)

Better to be taught by suffering than to be taught by sin! Better to lie in God's dungeon than to revel in the devil's palace.

– Charles Spurgeon

"After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you."

–1 Peter 5:10

I really don't believe I can stress enough how important it is to have a rock solid theology of suffering before one actually suffers. . . . We must learn to suffer well!

– Mike Riccardi

Introduction

Suffering is like ocean waves that dash you upon the STRONG ROCK of Christ.

In his *History of Christian Missions*, Stephen Neil mentions the **Sufferings** of the early christians as one of the 6 main reasons the church grew so rapidly:

"Because of their dangerous situation vis-a-vis the law, Christians were almost bound to meet in secret . . . Every Christian knew that sooner or later he might have to testify to his faith at the cost of his life. . . . When persecution did break out, martyrdom could be attended by the utmost possible publicity. The Roman public was hard and cruel, but it was not altogether without compassion; and there is no doubt that the attitude of the martyrs, and particularly of the young women who suffered along with the men, made a deep impression. . . . In the earlier records what we find is calm, dignified, decorous behavior; cool courage in

the face of torment, courtesy towards enemies, and joyful acceptance of suffering as the way appointed by the Lord to lead to his heavenly kingdom. There are a number of well-authenticated cases of conversion of pagans in the very moment of witnessing the condemnation and death of Christians; there must have been far more who received impressions that in the course of time would be turned into a LIVING FAITH. (p.43-44).

Outline of our Study on Sufferology:

1. The DEFINITION of Suffering (precision)
2. The GIVER/DESIGNER of Suffering (predestinator)
3. The PURPOSES of Suffering (purposes)
4. The GAME-PLAN for Suffering (preparedness)
5. The CONQUERORS of Suffering (panorama of history)
6. The RESOLVE in Suffering (preeminent/passion/plan)

People are not prepared or able to rejoice in suffering unless they experience a **massive biblical revolution** of how they **think** and **feel** about the meaning of life. Human nature and American culture make it impossible to rejoice in suffering. This is a miracle in the human soul wrought by God through his Word. It is the aim of true counseling to be the agent of God in bringing about that miracle through the Word.

--John Piper

1. The DEFINITION of Suffering

Simply stated, suffering is anything which hurts or irritates.

- Often in the Old Testament, the words for suffering can convey squeezing, pressing, afflictions, bindings, feeling shut out. (Ps 69:29; Psalm 109:16, 22)
 - God inflicts pain (Job 5:18)
 - I am afflicted and in pain (Ps 69:28)
 - Afflictions, troubles, pains, oppression, weak.
- The predominant New Testament (Greek) words for suffering include:
 - To suffer (pascho) -- Acts 1.3 (Christ showed himself alive after his *suffering*; 2 Thess 1.5)

- To suffer hardship (sugkukapatheo) -- to suffer great hardship together with (2 Tim 1.5 - join with me in *suffering* for the gospel; 2 Tim 4.5 - *endure hardship*; 2 Tim 2.2 - *suffer hardship with me* as a good soldier of Christ Jesus)
- To endure sufferings (pathema) -- (1 Pet 5.9 - the same experience of *sufferings* are being accomplished by your brethren in the world; Phil 3.10 - we have the *fellowship of His sufferings*)
- Great hardship/toil (mochthos) -- (1 Thess 2.9 - you recall our labor and *hardship*)
- Great grief, pain, distress (lupeo) -- (1 Pet 1:6 - though now you are *distressed* by various trials)

Sufferings -- or, trials -- are God-appointed and God-brought afflictions.

2. The GIVER/DESIGNER of Suffering

- Deut 32:39 — “I, I am He, and there is no god besides Me; It is I who put to death and give life. I have wounded and it is I who heal.”
- Psalm 60:3 — “You have made your people experience hardship...”
- Job 6:4 — “For the arrows of the Almighty are within me...”
- Job 5:18 — “For [God] inflicts pain...”
- Isaiah 48:10 — “I have tested you in the furnace of affliction”
- Psalm 88: 15, 16 — “I suffer your terrors; I am overcome; Your burning anger has passed over me; your terrors have destroyed me”

- IN YOUR SUFFERING, *WHAT CHANGES?*
 1. the measure of your suffering
 2. the duration of your suffering
 3. the intensity of your suffering
 4. the feelings/responses in your suffering
 5. the relief of your suffering
- IN YOUR SUFFERING, *WHAT DOES **NOT** CHANGE?*
 1. God's Goodness
 2. God's Sovereignty & Decrees
 3. God's Presence
 4. God's Covenant-Love
 5. God's Promised-Heaven

So then, we must acknowledge, and trust in, **God's absolute sovereignty** even *in* the unpleasant and painful circumstances. Don't destroy your COMFORT *of* God's sovereignty *IN* your suffering and in *APPOINTING* your suffering.

The lesson for us, then, is that when we suffer, we should not seek to save God from His sovereignty. If we do that, we cut the legs out from under the solid, robust theology of God's absolute sovereignty that we depend on and cherish so much in those very times of suffering. To

try to soften God's involvement with suffering by reducing it to a mere *permission* [God 'allows' suffering/hardship] rather than a definite ordinance [God *decreed* it and *brought it to me*] is to weaken the spine-strengthening power that is supplied by Romans 8:28. To insist that God merely allows suffering rather than intentionally and wisely brings it about in order to glorify Himself, and thus most greatly bless His people, destroys the very theology of sovereign grace that is (1) such a comfort to our souls in such troubling times, and is (2) precisely that for which God means to receive glory and honor. (Mike Riccardi)

God is Sovereign and Righteous in *Ordaining* and *Bringing* Suffering.

The Bible-believing Christian has no choice but to admit that God sovereignly *and* actively brings about the evil events described in Lamentations (destruction of Jerusalem). But if our understanding of God's absolute sovereignty leads us to conclude that He is morally culpable, blameworthy, or in any way unrighteous, we're wrong. The Scripture writers never seek to save God from His sovereignty in evil and sinful events, yet they also never attribute evil to Him directly. (Mike Riccardi)

3. The PURPOSES of Suffering

Some **WRONG** forms of thinking in suffering:

1. I need to know "WHY" — self-deifying
2. I am angry, bitter, resentful — self-exalting
3. I am depressed — Self-focused
4. What's God trying to teach you — Short-sighted
5. I just need relief, the problem to end — temporarily-minded
6. God didn't know about it & couldn't prevent it — openness of God heresy
7. God doesn't want you to suffer — prosperity heresy

"Before God uses a man greatly, he must first bruise him deeply." (AW Tozer)

Thus one of the aims of God in the suffering of the saints is to enlarge their capacity to enjoy his glory both here and in the age to come. When their cup is picked up as it were from the "scum of the world" (1 Cor. 4:13), and tossed into the ocean of heaven's happiness, it will hold more happiness for having been long weaned off the world and made to live on God alone.

— John Piper

- God works out His sovereign, decreed plan (including our suffering moments): [God both *willed* it and is *working* it out.]
 - Genesis 50:20
 - Ephesians 1:11
 - Luke 22:22 (the death of Christ!; Acts 4:28)

WHY does God bring suffering?

- to HUMBLE us of our pride (Peter's denials)
- to EMPTY us of our self-confidence (Paul in 2 Cor 12)
- to MOLD us like the Man of Sorrows (Rom 8:28-29)
- to WEAN us off the present world (Paul's words in Phil 3:10, 20-21)
- to USE us in evangelizing thru suffering (Acts 16 & Philippian jailer)
- to DRIVE us to persistent praying (=the whole *Book of Psalms!*; Ps 55:17)
- to MATURE us to greater strength & usefulness (Peter in John 20-21; Luke 22:32)
- to GLORIFY His great Name (John 9:3)
- to COMPEL us to rest in His sovereignty (Job 38-42)
- To FULFILL His own good pleasure (even if the *reason* is hidden and undisclosed to us; Deut 29:29; Ps 135:6)

- Thomas Boston wrote a book titled: *The Crook and the Lot: The sovereignty & wisdom of God in the afflictions of men*, displayed and spoke at length about believers & suffering. He asked: **Why does God make some things crooked?** Why does God make some things crooked, even when we pray for Him to make them straight?
[By "Crook" he refers to unforeseen afflictions/troubles and by "lot" he refers to your place/lot in life as God brings things about by His providence]

Why afflictions? Why unforeseen troubles? Why pains? Why suffering?

- 1) The crooked things in life are a test to help us determine whether we really are trusting in Christ for our salvation.
- 2) whatever crooks there are in our earthly lot turn our hearts away from this vain world and teach us to look for happiness in the life to come. Suffering is part of our preparation for eternity.
- 3) the crooked things in life convict us of our sins. The reason that anything is crooked at all is because there is sin in the world, including our own sin. The Holy Spirit often uses the crooks in our lot to touch our conscience, reminding us of some particular sin that we need to confess.
- 4) the crooked things in life may correct us for our sins. There are times when suffering serves as an instrument of God's justice, as a punishment for our sin.
- 5) the crooked things may keep us from committing a sin
- 6) the crooked things uncover a sinful attitude of the heart so deep that it could only be revealed by suffering a painful trial.
- 7) the crooked things display his grace in our godliness.

So Boston concluded:

Therefore, we are called to trust in him, even for the things that seem crooked.

When we suffer, we must trust that God knows what He is doing, and that He works in and through the pain and afflictions of His people for His glory and for their sanctification.

— R.C. Sproul

3 AXIOMS WE MUST EMBRACE:

1. God never establishes a no-fly zone keeping all problems away
2. We also sample joys and good gifts from God's kind hand
3. We know that God acts in our suffering

THE PURPOSE of suffering is to "ANCHOR YOUR EXPERIENCE MORE DEEPLY IN GOD'S GOODNESS".

— David Powlison

4. The GAME-PLAN/STRATEGY for Suffering

We talk about living well, we talk about dying well, but we must recapture a biblical understanding of *suffering well*.

"Show yourself a Christian, by suffering without murmuring; - in patience possess your soul: they lose nothing who gain Christ." (Samuel Rutherford)

• **A Game Plan, a Strategy for "Suffering Well":**

1. READ THE WORD [re-claim God's promises]
2. RESPOND IN PRAYER
3. REHEARSE GOD'S CHARACTER
4. RESOLVE TO SERVE
5. RECAPTURE HEAVEN'S NEARNESS

Suffering Well (alliterated):

- TURN! - from self to GOD
- TRAVAIL! - in prayer
- TRUST! - in your God
- TELL! — self & others of God
- TRIUMPH! — in heaven

If your Lord calls you to suffering, do not be dismayed, for He will provide a deeper portion of Christ in your suffering.

— Samuel Rutherford

I like in my time of trouble to find a **promise [in Scripture]** which exactly fits my need, and then to put my finger on it, and say, "Lord, this is thy word; I beseech thee to prove that it is so, by carrying it out in my case. I believe that this is thine own writing; and I pray thee make it good to my faith." I believe in plenary inspiration, and I humbly look to the Lord for a plenary fulfillment of every sentence that he has put on record.

— Charles Spurgeon

- **Remember to “Thank God” for your trials** (1 Thess 5:18 — in everything give thanks!)
 - trials humble you
 - trials grow you
 - trials refocus you
 - trials form you
 - trials encourage you

“Our infirmities become the black velvet on which the diamond of God’s love
glitters all the more brightly.”
— Charles Spurgeon

5. The CONQUERORS of Suffering

“The greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus... For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake...” (2 Cor 4:7-11)

“Just as it is written, ‘For your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’ But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us!” (Rom 8:36-37)

- Job
 - Job’s Godliness (1:1-5)
 - Job’s Enemies (1:6)
 - Job’s God (1:7-12)
 - Job’s Heartache (1:13-19)
 - Job’s Pain (1:20a; 2:13)
 - Job’s Worship (1:20-21)
 - Job’s Integrity (1:22; 2:1-6)
 - Job’s Extreme Loss (2:7-8)
 - Job’s Theology (2:9-10)
 - Job’s Solution (Job 40:1-5; 42:1-6)
- Moses
 - chose the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; looking to the reward (seeing him who is unseen) (Heb 11:27)
- The Psalmists:
 - Psalm 13 - how to deal with distress
 - Psalm 6 - when you’re in trouble, still TRUST God

- Psalm 22 - suffering Messiah
- Psalm 35 - how to pray when enemies LURK for you
- Psalm 41 - how to live a blessed life in a FALLEN world
- Psalm 54 - whatever comes in life, TRUST GOD
- Psalm 55 - persevere under pressure, TRUST GOD
- Psalm 69 - in your distress, PRAY OPENLY AND HONESTLY
- Psalm 77 - how to pray in confusion in life
- Psalm 79 - how to pray when the unimaginable happens
- Psalm 102 - the painful seasons of life
- Our Lord Jesus
 - His passion week, rejection, betrayal, crucifixion (1 Peter 2:21-25; Hebrews 12:1-2)
- The Apostle Paul
 - 2 Cor 6:4-9 — his sufferings
 - 2 Cor 6:10 — how Paul got through it; his perspective
 - 2 Cor 6:16-18 — promises to God's people
 - Or again,
 - 2 Cor 11:23-29 — Paul's sufferings
 - 2 Cor 11:30 - boasts in his weakness
 - 2 Cor 12:7-10 - for Christ's sake (his glory!)
- William Gouge
 - A pastor who suffered greatly. He married a godly woman, Elizabeth. They were married and had 13 children together — only 8 reached maturity. All the rest died in early ages.
 - He suffered from asthma and kidney stones in his later years. But in his acute suffering he would say: "I am a great sinner, but I comfort myself in a great Savior"
 - He would often say while *in his suffering* Job's words: "Shall we receive good from the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?"
- John Owen
 - He suffered much in his life from ongoing health problems. He had asthma and gallstones in his last years which both kept him from preaching.
 - He would say: "Live, pray and hope and wait patiently, and do not despond. The PROMISE stands invincible, that HE will never leave us, nor forsake us!"
- Hristo Kulichev
 - On January 9, 1985, Pastor Hristo Kulichev, a Congregational pastor in Bulgaria, was arrested and put in prison. His crime was that he preached in his church even though the state had appointed another man the pastor, one whom the congregation did not elect.
 - Kulichev's trial was a mockery of justice, and he was sentenced to eight months imprisonment. During his time in prison he made Christ known every way he could.
 - When he got out, he wrote, "Both prisoners and jailers asked many questions, and it turned out that we had a more fruitful ministry there than we could have expected in church. God was better served by our presence in prison than if we had been free."¹⁵ In many places in the world, the words of Jesus are as radically relevant as if they had

been spoken yesterday. Luke 21:12 - they will bring you before kings and governors for my name's sake. It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony!

- **The pain of our shattered plans is for the purpose of scattered grace (John Piper)**

- The seed that falls to the ground and dies (John 12.24) is not just once in martyrdom but over and over and over as we obey the command to take up our cross *daily* and follow Jesus (Luke 9.23) (Piper).
- John Flavel knew suffering: He was born in 1628 in England, his parents were imprisoned for holding an unauthorized worship meeting. In prison, they contracted a plague and though they were released, they died shortly thereafter. Well, he married a woman named Joan, a godly woman who gave birth to their first child in She died while giving birth and the baby died as well. Then he would marry two more times and he would bury both of them. He was constantly hounded & persecuted by authorities. He was harassed and his writings were burned. Surely he knew suffering!
 - Flavel spoke at length of afflictions -- which he called '*sanctified afflictions*' for God's elect -- and gave 8 reasons why God actively & graciously brings hardships into our lives:
 1. To reveal, deter, and mortify sin.
 2. To produce godliness and spiritual fruit.
 3. To reveal the character of God.
 4. To relinquish the temporal for the eternal.
 5. To produce a sincere faith, devoid of hypocrisy.
 6. To encourage fellowship with God through word, prayer, and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.
 7. To bear witness to the world.
 8. To cultivate communion with Christ, the greatest sufferer.

6. The RESOLVE in Suffering

- Look to Christ as our example: 1 Peter 2 and esp verse 25: trust God's perfections!
- 1 Peter 4 — suffering is coming
 1. Expect it (12)
 2. Rejoice in it (13-14)
 3. Be holy in it (15-16)
 4. Trust GOD in it (17-19)> SOLUTION >> 5:10-11

Remember! THE PURPOSE of suffering is to "ANCHOR YOUR EXPERIENCE MORE DEEPLY IN GOD'S GOODNESS"

Conclusion

Testimony of William Tyndale. Tyndale died at 42 years old, never married, and was never buried (as he was burnt).

In his book: *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, Tyndale wrote:

If God promises riches, the way thereto is poverty. Whom He loveth he chasteneth, whom he exalteth, he casteth down. Whom He saveth he damneth. First, he brings no man to heaven except he sent him to hell first. If he promise life he slays him first, when he builds, he casts down first. He is no patcher, he cannot build on another man's foundations. He will not work until all be past remedy and brought unto such a case, that men may see how that his hand, his power, his mercy, his goodness and truth hath wrought all together.

Let us therefore look diligently whereunto we are called, that we deceive not ourselves. We are called, not to dispute as the pope's disciples do, but **to die with Christ** that we may live with him, and to suffer with him that we may reign with him....

For if God be on our side, what matter does it make who is against us, be they bishops, cardinals, popes, or whatsoever names they will....

Then Tyndale's final words are recorded in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*:

YOUR Cause is Christ's gospel, a light that must be fed with the blood of faith If when we be buffeted for well-doing, we suffer patiently and endure, that is acceptable to God; for to that end we are called. For CHRIST also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow his steps, who did no sin....

Hereby have we perceived love, that he had lain down his life for us; therefore we ought also to lay down our lives for the brethren... Let not your body faint IF the pain be above your strength, REMEMBER, whatsoever you ask in my name, i will give it to you. And pray to our Father in that name, and he will ease your pain, or shorten it AMEN.

A Puritan prayer in suffering:

Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly, Thou hast brought me to the valley of vision, where I live in the depths but see Thee in the heights; hemmed in by mountains of sin I behold Thy glory.

Let me learn by paradox that the way down is the way up, that to be low is to be high, that the broken heart is the healed heart, that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit, that the repenting soul is the victorious soul, that to have nothing is to possess all, that to bear the cross is to wear the crown, that to give is to receive, that the valley is the place of vision.

Lord, in the daytime stars can be seen from deepest wells, and the deeper the wells the brighter Thy stars shine; let me find Thy light in my darkness, Thy life in my death, Thy joy in my sorrow, Thy grace in my sin, Thy riches in my poverty, Thy glory in my valley. Amen.