

Confronting Christianity – Part 11

How Could a Loving God Allow So Much Suffering?

Crosspoint – Dave Spooner – Nov. 13th, 2022

Intro:

- There are two types of suffering: the suffering you choose and the suffering that chooses you. The suffering you choose results from things like breaking the law, drinking too much, going to the gym, or buying a cat. This type of suffering is easy to explain and understand; very few people blame God for this type of suffering. The suffering that chooses you comes from things like wars, natural disasters, diseases, premature death, or childhood abuse. The suffering that chooses us is the suffering that we struggle with the most. In this type of suffering, people are more prone to ask the question that we are dealing with today: "How could a loving God allow so much suffering?"
- I have done a fairly comprehensive study on suffering in scripture, which is all over the Bible in various forms. We are never guaranteed that we will not suffer. On the contrary, we are told things like, "In the world, you will have trouble" (John 16:33) and, "It is necessary to pass through many troubles on our way into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:23), and to "not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (I Peter 4:12).
- Another thing that stood out to me in scripture is Jesus's interaction with suffering. Everywhere He went He alleviated suffering, from curing all types of diseases to casting out demons to raising the dead. He also warned people to repent and receive a changed heart and change their behavior to avoid suffering in the future. Jesus Himself was "perfected through suffering" (Heb 5:8-9) and suffered on our behalf so that we will not suffer in eternity (I Peter 2:21). **Jesus alleviated suffering, but He did not eliminate it . . . at least not yet.** Which tells us that in God's sovereign plan, there is good reason and purpose for why it yet remains.
- There are many great books that deal in-depth with the subject of suffering, and I have a list of them at the end of the notes. I would highly recommend them to you to equip you to better understand and process suffering. Rebecca McLaughlin also does a good job with her chapter, centering her thoughts on the interaction of Jesus with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (Luke 11). I would recommend you read that chapter if you have not already. I am not going to use that chapter for our primary text today because I have recently spoken from it, but today we are going to take a look at a number of passages of scripture to better understand God's purposes in suffering that will help us all to continue to develop a theology of suffering.
- I also want to acknowledge that our immediate response to suffering is a desire for it to stop—immediately—and I share the same desire. In my more than thirty years of following Jesus, and almost thirty years of pastoral ministry, through facing suffering in my own life and in the lives of people that I love, I have learned to pray in the way Jesus prayed when He was suffering. The prayer is "take this from me – and Your will be done" (Matt. 26:39). This is a prayer of both desire and faith, entrusting oneself to the good, wise and loving plan and care of God. This is not the prayer that some pray while undergoing suffering, the one that says "take this from me, and if You don't, I will hold You responsible, and I will walk away from You," the one that some have prayed and perhaps some in this room struggle with as well.
- Knowing that suffering will no longer be a reality in eternity, it is helpful for us to understand what purpose it could have until then. Here are a few reasons scripture gives us to help us have perspective, hope, and strength in our times of suffering.

Suffering proves our faith

1 Peter 1:6-7 ESV

Though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

- For a "little while," even if it is for a lifetime, is but a brief moment in your existence. Suffering gives us an opportunity to prove if our faith is genuine. Anyone can have "faith" when everything is well, but faith is truly proved as genuine through the test of suffering. The primary way our faith can be tested on this side of eternity is through the "fire" of suffering. If your faith is shown to be true, it is genuine and precious indeed.

Suffering forges deep fellowship

Phil 3:10-11 NIV

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.

- Nothing forges deep connection like suffering. Ask anyone who has played on a football team, or fought in the military, or gone through difficult times with others. These are bonds that are binding. They are formed in our relationships with others, and they also happen in our relationship with Christ. If you have been betrayed, know that He has been betrayed; if you have been falsely accused, know that He has been falsely accused; if you have suffered physical pain, know that He has suffered physical pain. The fellowship of suffering binds us together.

Suffering creates gratitude

1 Peter 5:10 ESV

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

- Once you have gone without something and then it is restored to you, you are much more grateful to have it back. We develop gratitude through suffering by being without, whether it is materially, or physically, or relationally.

Suffering develops our character

Rom 5:3-5 ESV

We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

- What can give us cause to rejoice in our suffering? Knowing that through suffering, we are given the opportunity to develop our character. The only thing that can produce endurance is having

something to endure. Through the process of endurance, we grow in our character and strength. What gets us through suffering is hope, and our hope compounds from one situation to the next so that we progress forward with hope shining the light and leading the way. Hope is necessary for endurance, and knowing we are developing it gives us reason to rejoice.

Suffering makes us mature

James 1:2-5 NIV

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. 4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

- Maturity comes through difficulty. It gives us perspective, wisdom, and wholeness, knowing who is with us along the way and conforming us into His image. Infancy gives up and gives in easily. Maturity stays the course and finishes the race.

Suffering keeps us humble

2 Cor 12:7-11 ESV

So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

- Even Paul, who was a great, mature, gifted man of faith, needed to learn and be kept humble for our sake and for his. The same is true of us. Suffering explodes the mirage of self-sufficiency and self-exaltation, causing us to be dependent on the grace of Christ and to focus on the greatness of Christ.

Suffering grants us reward

Matt 5:11-12 NIV

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

- Reward is given to those who overcome and endure. Suffering gives us opportunities to overcome, trusting ourselves to the God who sees, knows all things, and in His justice rewards all things. We are blessed to be granted opportunities to receive reward.

Conclusion

- Equip and educate yourself in your development of a theology of suffering. Study what we have gone over today on your own. Read the books that I have suggested on the subject. Also, study

the books of 1st and 2nd Peter, especially I Peter 3:13-18 to know how to respond (do not fear what they fear, do not be troubled, in your heart set apart Christ and Lord, hang onto hope, continue to do good, follow the Father's will).

- Pray along with Christ in your suffering, "take this from me – may your will be done."
- Next week, our last message in this series: *How could a loving God send people to hell?*
- Closing prayer

Book Recommendations

- "Walking with God through Pain and Suffering" by Timothy Keller
- "Suffering is Never for Nothing" by Elisabeth Elliot
- "Suffering: Gospel Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense" by Paul David Tripp
- "The Problem of Pain" by C.S. Lewis
- "Suffering and the Sovereignty of God" by John Piper