

Biblical “Sufferology”¹

Introduction:

I want to begin this morning by thanking you for the outpouring of comments, texts and emails in response to the message last week on Joy in suffering. I suppose I should not have been surprised because so many of you are intimately acquainted with both the love of Christ and personal suffering. You know the kind of “joy in suffering” that Paul spoke of last week in Rom. 5:3-5.

For the faithful follower of Christ, hardly any experience in this life can open our hearts to the love of God like personal suffering. That’s because suffering – even when it’s brought on by our own sin – can destroy our sense of self-sufficiency and drive us to Christ who alone is able to forgive, redeem, and restore, fill our hearts with joy.

This morning, as promised, I want to talk with you again about personal suffering. I’m calling this message Biblical Sufferology” because I want you to become familiar with a biblical theology of suffering. My concern here, as one of the shepherds of this little flock, is that when suffering comes along and kicks in the front door of your heart and threatens to destroy you from the inside out, you will be equipped to stand firm in the grace of God and rejoice in your suffering.

It would be impossible to offer an exhaustive study on everything the Bible has to say about suffering in 45-50 minutes. So, this morning I’m going to whittle down to four major points:

- I. God’s Presence in suffering
- II. God’s purposes for Suffering
- III. God’s Providence in Suffering
- IV. Caring for those who suffer.

Now, if I happen to NOT finish in the allotted time, I think there will be plenty left over for next week. So, let’s begin. The first observation we should make is that All Humans Suffer: It doesn’t matter who you are or where you hail from, suffering is just a part of life. In my immediate family, for example, the Lord has seen fit to give us a son who shortly after birth caught a virus that damaged his heart which required many hospitalizations, medications, and a defibrillator implant

Years later my wife was in a terrible car accident which may have been the cause of several surgeries along serious and chronic back pain that persists to this day.

¹ This sermon is based on a Dan’s BCDC Lecture on Counseling Those Who Suffer.

Sometime later, another of our children developed Type 1 Diabetes that requires attention day by day and hour by hour.

For my part, as most of you know, on Christmas morning 2020 I was hospitalized with a severe case of Covid 19, which, for a little while, we thought might end in the worst possible way, humanly speaking. My point here is simply this, that no one gets a pass from personal suffering. If you haven't suffered yet... you will (let that bless your heart for just a moment).

What is suffering? Well, Elizabeth Elliot boiled it down to its most basic form when she defined it simply as having what you don't want or wanting what you don't have.²

The fact of the matter is, God's people are not immune to pain and suffering. We live in a world that has experienced the devastating effects of sin, so all of us suffer. Thankfully, the Bible teaches us much about suffering. In Romans 8 for example, the Apostle Paul talks about this (Read Rom. 8:22-24).

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning in the pains of childbirth until now.²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

In other words, we know that one day God will make good on his promises to bring his elect to their appointed glory. For now, however, we live in a time that can be compared to a young woman in labor. Before she can experience the joy of holding her own precious baby in her arms, there will be pain. So it is with the people of God. We suffer in this life, but one day our suffering will give way to joy inexpressible and full of glory at the revelation of the children of God, the eschatological redemption of our bodies.

But as we wait for that day, the Lord wants you to know that He has not left you to endure these sufferings alone. And that launches us in to point # 1

I. God's Presence in Suffering.

1. Let me remind you of Three important truths about God. (you should write them down so you can discuss theme in your small group). These are truths you must believe if we are going to be able to handle suffering well.

- God is completely Sovereign
- God is infinite in wisdom
- God is perfect in love

2. In His Love God always wills what is best for us.

3. In His Wisdom He always knows what is best, and in His Sovereignty, He has the power to bring it about.³

² Joni Earikson Tada quoting Elizabeth Elliot. But I haven't been able to identify the original reference.

³ Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God*, (Colorado Springs, Nav Press, 1998), 18

2. It's only a slight exaggeration to say that the sovereignty of God is proclaimed in nearly every chapter of the Bible.

For example. We read in

Lam. 3:37-38, *"Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?"*

3. I realize that it's sometimes difficult to remember that God is sovereign over every disaster. We like the fact that God is sovereign over the good things in life, but we struggle to accept the fact that God is sovereign over all things. But, my friends, (listen carefully) this is our hope when we suffer. Our hope is that our suffering is not random or meaningless but is something that is absolutely governed by the infinitely wise and loving God.

4. We also tend to forget that though the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was an amazing demonstration of God's love for us, it was also a horrible experience of the worst kind of suffering. Nevertheless, we believe that God sent His Son into the world to experience that suffering on our behalf so that we could be saved. Jesus' suffering was for our good and the glory of God.

- My friend, if you are still on the fence about whether you believe in God and whether you should lay all your hope upon the finished work of Christ on the cross, then you have no redeeming category for suffering. Suffering and death are just dark and hopeless happenings that descend upon your meaningless life.
- There isn't any hope in them. There isn't any purpose for them. Nothing really matters. Life is just a meaningless journey that leads to nowhere.
- There is no hope for anything good after you die; no reward; no glory; no forgiveness; no reconciliation with God, just non-existence.
- I'm here to tell you this morning that there is a God and you are accountable to Him. You know that intuitively though you try to suppress it daily. I want to invite you to stop leaning on your own understanding. Quit making it up as you go along. Fly to Jesus. Embrace His word. Repent of your sins and discover everlasting joy.

5. One of the places where we find God declaring that He is sovereign over suffering is back in the book of Exodus 4:10-11 (read).

- But Moses said to the LORD, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue." ¹¹ Then the LORD said to him,
- "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?"

- When you son asks, “Dad, who caused my diabetes? The Lord responds, “Is it not I, the Lord?”
- Who caused my child to be born with Downs Syndrome? “Is it not I, the Lord?”
- Who gave me this brain that so often fails me? Is it not I the Lord?”
- Who made me unable to have a child? “Is it NOT I the Lord?”

6. You see, beloved, God is very present in your trial; your suffering. And that is your hope. God has never done a single thing in this world that was not absolutely on purpose, for His glory, and the good of His people.

7. So if you are going to trust God in your suffering, you must believe that

- God is completely Sovereign
- God is infinite in wisdom
- God is perfect in love. And that sovereignty, wisdom, and love are actively engaged in every aspect of your current problem, no matter how big or how small. No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly.

8. So you see, God is present in your in your suffering. Second, let’s consider...

II. God’s Purposes in Suffering

- Because the sovereign God is actively present in your suffering, you can be sure that he has specific purposes for your suffering. Allow me to point you to just a few...

1. To Humble us: Deut. 8:2, “And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not.”

(See also 2 Cor. 12:7-9)

2. To Wean us from the World :

2 Cor. 4:17-18 “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us and eternal weight of glory, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. (see also Heb. 11:16)

2. Remind us of the value of God's promises of future grace.

(See also 1 Pet 4:13)

Rom 8:17-18 "...and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. ¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

3. To Equip us to comfort others: (2 Cor 1:3-4)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵

(See also - Heb 13:3)

4. Chasten us for sin (1 Cor 11:30; Job 5:17; Heb 12:5-12)

5. Build Christian character (Rom 5:3; 2 Thess 1:4-6; Ja 1:2-5)

6. Ultimate comfort and praise from the Lord (1 Pet 5:10; 1:7b)

7. To prove our faith (1 Pet 1:7)

8. Draw us closer to God (Phil 3:10) and our hearts toward heaven. "That I may know him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering..."

9. Future reward (Rom 8:17-18; 2 Cor 4:17; Rev 2:10)

10. Turn us from a dangerous direction (Ps 119:67)

So, God has many purposes for the suffering you experience. And this brings us to the 3rd point.

We have learned about God's Presence in Suffering; His purposes in suffering; and third...

II. God's Providence in Suffering

1. When we think about the sovereignty of God over suffering, we are really talking about something called the Providence of God. What is the Providence of God? One author defines like this:

- a. God's providence is His constant care for and absolute rule over all His creation for His own glory and the good of His people.

- b. The providence of God is the invisible hand of God governing and sustaining all of His creation in such a way that brings about His perfect will in the affairs of this world. Saint Augustine said, “Nothing therefore happens unless the Omnipotent [God] wills it to happen: He either permits it to happen, or He brings it about Himself.”
2. There is no such thing as “Chance” or “bad luck” in this world. God’s providence rules over all. What should distinguish the suffering of believers from unbelievers is the confidence that our suffering is under the control of an all-powerful and all-loving God; our suffering has meaning and purpose in His eternal plan, and He brings or allows to come into our lives ONLY that which is for His glory and our good.⁴
3. Beloved, we should not allow ourselves to be offended by the thought of God being sovereign over our suffering. We should take comfort in this truth.
4. Whatever kind of suffering you may be experiencing just now, we know that God has a loving and wise purpose for it.
5. Many people in the Bible understood this truth and trusted it by Faith.
 - a. King Hezekiah said, “Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish” (Isa. 38:17)
 - b. Joseph said to his brothers, “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good” (Gen 50:20 – see also
 - c. Psa. 105:16-17
[God] summoned a famine on the land and broke all supply of bread, he sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave.
 - c. David wrote, “Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep your law”
 - d. (Psa. 119:67). “It was good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your rules”
 - e. (Psa. 119:71).
“It was good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.”
 - f. Psalm 119:75 “I know, O LORD, that your rules are righteous, and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me.”
 - g. Jeremiah said, “Though He brings grief, He will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love” (Lam. 3:32-33)

We have seen God’s presence in suffering,

⁴ Bridges, 32

His Purposes in suffering,

His providence in suffering. And now, let's use our final moments to talk about how to care for those who are suffering.

III. Caring for those who suffer:

A. Administer Compassion:

1. Compassion speaks with those who grieve.⁵
 - “Oh, I am so sorry. This is so hard and painful. It tears away at my to hear about this.” Such words might seem dramatic or extreme, but they are apt words of compassion from a loving friend.⁶
2. Compassion is slow to offer counsel.
 - Remember Job's friends (Job. 2:13). Focus on loving, serving, weeping with, and consoling the one who suffers. Let them have some time. Eventually, they may welcome your counsel about how to respond to their suffering
3. Compassion points to the love of God (Rom. 8:35-37)
 - ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?
³⁶ As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
 - (Matt. 10:29-31)
Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰ But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

B. Administer Love:

1. “To love is to give what I have that you need because God wants me to, no matter how I feel” (cf. Jn. 3:16; Eph. 5:25, et al).⁷

⁵ Edward Welch, *Side by Side*, (Wheaton, Crossway, 2015), 103

⁶ *Ibid*, 103

⁷ Jay Adams, *What To Do When Your Marriage Goes Sour* (Pamphlet), (Phillipsburg, N.J. P&R Pub. 1975)

- a. Give of your time – “Weep with those who weep.” Appropriate touch, etc. Assure them that you will walk with them through their suffering
- b. Give your prayers - God is the one who can meet their needs. 2 Cor 1:3-4 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction...
- c. Give God’s Word: At first, minister grace rather theology.
(Heb. 13:5-6), Remind them that God will never leave or forsake them and the good shepherd always leads down the right path (Psalm 23).
- d. Give Hope:

(Ps 119:68

- God is good and does good.
- Rom 8:32);
He who did not spare his own son but delivered him up for us all, how will he not also with Him freely give us all things?”
 - Grace to endure is promised with the trial (1 Cor 10:13);
 - He is near and our help in time of need
 - (Ps 46:1);
 - Their suffering is not worthy to be compared to the glory to come (Rom 8:18; 1 Pet 4:13)

C. Administer Service (Get the church body involved):

1. Don’t ask “What can I do?” Offer to meet specific needs.

Has anyone offered to bring you a meal? O.K. I am going to bring one.

Would you like it on Mon. or Tuesday, Tonight or tomorrow night?”

“Make a grocery list and I will take care of it on Tuesday if that’s the best day for you.

Please let me pick up your laundry.”

“I can take care of school.”

“I can run errands this week. How about Thursday?”

2. Do not assume others are helping – talk to others. Strategize.
 - a. Include ministry to other family and friends
 - b. Simple encouragement – Starbucks, sonic, notes, texts

B. Administer Instruction:

1. Remind them that suffering is to be expected in this life (1 Pet. 4:12)

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.
2. Assure them that they are not alone in this trial (Gal. 6:2)
 - Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.
3. Address Sin as Needed
4. Help them focus on God’s purposes for suffering: Remind them that God is faithful (1 Cor. 10:13). You have the power to not sin in your your suffering.

C. S. Lewis once said, “God who foresaw your tribulation, has especially armed you to go through it, not without pain but without stain” (C.S. Lewis).⁸

5. If the suffering comes from mistreatment, Remind them of how Jesus suffered as an example to follow (1 Pet. 2).
6. Remind them that they are called to overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:14-21)
7. Remind them that they can still minister to others in the midst of their suffering (2 Cor. 9:8).

⁸ Mark Water, *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Books, 2000), 1064

8. If they are unbelievers, call them to repent and believe\

Luke 13:1-5 Jesus and the tower disaster

¹There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”