

**Core Seminar**

**Suffering for the Glory of God**

**Class 5: Unbiblical Reactions to Suffering**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

***Temptations to Find Hope in What is Passing Away***

1. **Introduction**

How many of you have ever done single-track mountain-biking? OK—imagine that you’re racing down the side of a mountain on a dirt trail about as wide as your bike. Which strategy do you think works best: keeping your eye on all the rocks and gullies that you need to miss? Or keeping your eye on your goal ahead of you?

Right. The goal. And the same is true in times of suffering. We do best when we set our minds on the goal, not all the obstacles. Just like Jesus “who, for the hope set before him endured the cross . . .”

But today’s class isn’t really about the goal; it’s about the rocks on the side. Because while our minds shouldn’t be focused on them, it’s still important to know what rocks are out there. The reason we have an entire core seminar on suffering well is because of how easily it is to suffer poorly. So today, we’ll spend time thinking through some of the most common ways that we can suffer poorly. The rocks on the side of the trail, so to speak.

Suffering has a way of tempting us to lose sight of what God is really like, to minimize one or more of God’s attributes. Suffering poorly, at its root, has a deficient view of who God is. Even people whose theology is correctly fashioned up here in their heads can suffer poorly because their *practical* theology—the view of God that actually drives their hopes and fears and actions, is false. In his letter to a group of Christians under pressure, Peter exhorts them, “Be sober-minded; be watchful…the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (**1 Pet. 5:8**). One way to be watchful is to be aware of unbiblical responses to suffering. The more we do, the more equipped we’ll be to respond in a God-honoring way. So for the rest of our time together: five unbiblical responses to suffering.

**Before we get there, though, I’d love to get your ideas for how this class might be useful. What are some benefits of thinking through unbiblical responses to suffering?**

Now, five is a big number. So just like when we went through eight reasons for suffering in the Bible, I’m going to narrow your assignment a bit. Listen to all five, and pick one or two that you’re going to do more thinking about this coming week. And keep in mind that you’re not so much looking for gaps in the theology that you profess with your mouth—though some of those gaps may well exist—but gaps in the theology you show in your life. Where are there gaps in your practical theology that will trip you up when times of suffering come your way?

1. **The stiff upper lip - *God doesn’t exist***

Our first unbiblical response is the atheistic response. And perhaps surprisingly, it is extremely common among Christians—maybe even *especially* common among Christians. It’s the “grin and bear it” strategy for dealing with suffering—the stiff upper lip. Do you see why it’s the strategy of the atheist? It says that in a time of great difficulty, I’m going to move forward under my own power—as if God did not exist. I’m going to tell people I’m OK—‘cause I’m not the kind of person to ask for help. My strategy is all about what *I’m* going to do . . .. and in those moments I become a practical atheist. To take a really mundane example, we’ve probably all been in the car when the driver (usually the guy) is lost but refuses to stop and ask for directions - everyone is left miserable…and why? He’s proud. There’s something about asking for help that is humbling and ever since Adam and Eve gave into the temptation that they could be better off if *they* were God[[1]](#footnote-1) (independent, self-reliant, deciding what’s good) . . . ever since then, humanity’s been infected with a reluctance to admit we need help. Even when we’re suffering, there are times we’d rather grin and bear it than ask for help and be seen as weak.

Two thoughts on how to escape from this unbiblical response:

1. Humble yourself. Self-reliance is a form of pride. And, not surprisingly, Scripture’s remedy for pride is humility. Think of Peter’s words to suffering Christians: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:6-7)

This verse tells us three things. First, recognize self-reliance as pride, which should be confessed as sin. Second, recognize God as the mighty Savior and not you. And third, demonstrate that humility by casting your cares on him[[2]](#footnote-2). Do you have it all together? No! That’s the admission you made when you became a Christian. Is temptation hard? Yes! Jesus certainly thought so. Do we showcase God’s glory when we stubbornly try to deal with things ourselves? No! We don’t. And quite often we end up as burning wreckage as well.

1. Consider God’s goals for your suffering. Sometimes it can be quite difficult to *both* depend on God *and* be responsible. So you have a bad back. There’s a lot you can and should do, right? Go to the doctor, go to therapy, stretch, avoid lifting heavy things . . .

And in doing so much, you might wonder what it really means to depend on God. One thing that can help is to consider God’s goals in this suffering. Think of Peter’s words about trial in 1 Peter 1: “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.” Now, you can do a lot to help your back to heal. But can you refine your own faith? Can you make sure that your faith endures to the end? Can you make sure that your faith results in praise to God? Of course not! Whenever we take a step back and see God’s goals for our trials, we recognize how powerless we are to achieve them—not matter how many temporal things may seem within our control. Considering God’s goals for our suffering is a good way out of self-reliance. So be responsible. Ice that back! But remind yourself how little control you have over the things that really matter in this trial. And cherish God’s promise that he *will* accomplish those things that are so important and so far out of your hands.

1. **Escape – *Running to false gods***

Then there’s the response of escape. Turning to something other than God for relief. For a moment, it feels like we’ve ‘escaped’ from our problems. Then we sober up, find that nothing has changed and the cycle continues. How do we escape? Sometimes we literally flee. We flee suffering through drugs and alcohol. We flee a bad marriage through divorce, a difficult relationship through the silent treatment. Sometimes we try to escape through distraction—our jobs, sex, shopping, food, entertainment, or our physical appearance. Sometimes it’s simply fantasy, when we create a world in our heads where everything goes the way we want it to. In all these escapes, what we initially thought to be a ‘harmless excursion’ takes over our lives. We’ve invested in the empty promises of these false gods we’re trusting. And so we avoid having to trust the real God. It’s what the Bible calls idolatry.

God’s people in the Old Testament did exactly this when they put their trust in Egypt instead of in God to protect them from the powerful Assyrian army. But their choice would prove devastating:

“’Ah, stubborn children,’ declares the Lord, ‘who carry out a plan, but not mine, and who make an alliance, but not of my Spirit, that they may add sin to sin; who set out to go down to Egypt, without asking for my direction, to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt! Therefore shall the protection of Pharaoh turn to your shame, and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt to your humiliation…Egypt’s help is worthless and empty.’” (**Isa. 30:1-3, 7a**).

As he does so often, God promises that in mercy he will destroy this false savior Egypt so his people will learn to rely on him. I think one way we can test to see if something is a helpful diversion or a sinful escape is to look at our response when it’s finished. Did your vacation give you space to rest and think so that you’re geared up to seek God’s purposes in a difficult trial back at home? Or are you angry at God now that you have to return to the mess of your life? Do you dread having to shut down your massively multiplayer online game because real life is so messy? Then your diversion has probably become an idol.

So what’s the right response? Use the pleasures of this world—a nice dinner out, a massage, a vacation—not to escape your need to trust God but as a time of refuge to help you trust God. Look reality in the face, as hard as it might be, and resolve that you will trust the all-powerful, merciful God who is leading you through. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7, “From now on . . . those who use the things of the world [should live] as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.” (v. 29-31) The wonderful news is that the solid, glorious reality that is about to dawn in the new heavens and the new earth is far better than any escape you will every experience.

1. **I deserve better than this - *God rewards the righteous***

OK—here’s another one Christians are prone to. I deserve better than this. Which leads to anger or despair. Why anger? Because I feel God has betrayed me. I had a deal with God. I’d keep my act clean, follow him, and he’d give me a nice, comfortable life. Bad things are supposed to happen to the people *out there*. Not me. We’re the good people. And this can just as easily lead to despair because suffering makes me wonder if I’m not good enough for God. You might call this the “why me” problem.

Of course, you can see bad theology all over this. Whereas I’m thinking it’s unfair for God to do this to me, in actual fact what’s happened is that God has decided that my plans—for a nice, comfortable life—weren’t big enough. Consider Old Testament Israel as an example. They wanted a nice, comfortable life as God’s special people. But God had different plans. Isaiah 49:6: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.” And consider how those much larger and much better plans of God were so disruptive to Israel’s comfort. They involved God’s refining discipline that we read through the prophets. God’s larger plans subjected Israel to Roman occupation so that people from Israel would move to every part of the empire—so that at Pentecost when the gospel was first proclaimed, we read that “there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.” God’s plans tore the Jewish nation apart as the emerging Christians sect embraced their gentile brothers and sisters. God had much bigger plans than Israel—and Israel suffered as a result. But wouldn’t we all say it was worth it?

The “why me” problem certainly has bad theology at its core. But in no way means that people whose professed theology is dead on can’t struggle with it. In fact, sometimes it’s because they know that their theology is so much better than others’ that they’re prone to this. But this false strategy through suffering is based on a false view of God’s promises, isn’t it?

Writing to a group of Christians who were suffering, Peter writes, “Dear friends, *do not be surprised* at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you” (**1 Pet. 4:12**). That’s how you can diagnose yourself in this category. Do you *expect* to suffer? Would you be *surprised* if a decade went by and nothing bad happened to you? Or do you basically assume that life will continue on as it has? If you do, I suspect that you’ve got some problems in your practical theology.

We shouldn’t be surprised when we run into suffering. Not because we’re pessimistic, but because suffering is part of following Jesus. Instead of being surprised, Peter calls us to “rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.” (**1 Pet. 4:13**). It isn’t natural in and of ourselves to rejoice when we face suffering as a Christian. But when we understand that suffering has come because God’s plans were bigger and better than our own, God gives us the grace to rejoice because we’re not ashamed to be known as Jesus’ followers.

1. **Fear – *God can’t help it***

The next response: God’ can’t help it. He tried his best but this was beyond his control. An idea that ran through evangelicalism a few years ago. And many times before that, for that matter. It’s what’s been called the “openness of God.” We get God ‘off the hook’ by denying that He knows all future events. It’s thought that in this way, human freedom and God’s goodness are preserved. Listen to how one such theologian puts it:

“Decisions not yet made do not exist anywhere to be known even by God. They are potential – yet to be realized but not yet actual. God can predict a great deal of what we will choose to do, but not all of it, because some of it remains hidden in the mystery of human freedom…The God of the Bible displays an openness to the future that the traditional view of omniscience simply cannot accommodate.[[3]](#footnote-3)”

Denying God’s knowledge of future events is meant to offer comfort to those who may question the goodness of God, but it ends up doing the opposite. We’re left with a God who *hopes* things turn out the way He had planned, but isn’t sure[[4]](#footnote-4) – and we’re left feeling an awful loneliness in the midst of tragedy. But the Bible is quite clear that God is completely sovereign, and he knows all things, even before they happen:

* **Isa. 46:9b-10** “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.”
* **Ps. 139:4** “Before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely, O LORD.”

Now, of course, even people whose formal theology is better than this can think this way. When we hurt, it’s not uncommon to wonder if God knows what he’s doing. But he does, doesn’t he. He is good, he is in control, and he is careful with us.

This is what Asaph realized as he was struggling to trust God in **Psalm 73**. The wicked prospered while the godly suffered, and he began to wonder if he’d trusted God in vain. Maybe the wicked were right. “How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?” (**Ps. 73:11**). Then something changed, “When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, *until* I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end” (**Ps. 73:16-17**). From a limited human perspective, he couldn’t make sense of it, but when he looked at it from God’s perspective ([v17] *when he went into the sanctuary of God*) and saw their end, he was at peace. Compared to a wise God, he declares, “I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you” (**Ps. 73:22b**).

There will frequently be times when we will not be able to understand why God allowed something to happen. In those moments, we have simply to trust Him and go on obeying His wise commands for our lives.

1. **God has it out for me – *God is not good for me***

Sometimes we *know* that God is good; we *know* that he is in control. I guess the question we wrestle with his, “is God good for *me*?” I think this question can take two forms. First is the question of guilt. Is he punishing me for something? In other words, is he acting in my good through this suffering, or letting me have it because of something I did? The second way we can doubt God’s goodness is in the question of his purposes. Maybe I don’t *want* what God is doing in this trial. Maybe I don’t *want* to be a cog in his wheel. But my theology is too good to think I can get out of it. And so I just sit and sulk. Sometimes for a long time. I become God’s obedient, but reluctant servant. The example of Jonah comes to mind.

OK, a few thoughts here. First, let’s address the question of guilt. Is God punishing you for something? Let’s look at **Hebrews 12:5-8**:

“And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.’ 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.”

A few observations on these verses[[5]](#footnote-5):

1. This discussion of discipline is a ‘word of encouragement’ (12:5). This makes sense if the Christian’s desire is to please the heavenly Father.[[6]](#footnote-6)
2. God disciplines us for our *good*. Parents who have disciplined his/her children out of love for them understand this. The writer makes this connection in 12:9 – if we can submit to the discipline of our parents, who are sinners, how much more the discipline of a good God! And so even the idea of punishment that we see in that phrase, “and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son” is not to be taken in a judicial sense. Romans 8 tell us that there is no condemnation for those that are in Christ Jesus. Rather, this punishment is the kind of discipline we give to our kids. For their good. Because we love them.
3. God’s loving discipline shows us we are legitimate children (12:8). We don’t discipline the neighbors’ kids – because they aren’t ours! We discipline our own children.

So is my suffering God’s discipline for a specific sin? D. A. Carson puts it helpfully:

“It is the uncertainty of reading what is going on that sometimes breeds pain. Is the particular blow I am facing God’s way of telling me to change something? Or is it a form of discipline designed to toughen me or soften me to make me more useful? Or is it part of the heritage of all sons and daughters of Adam who live this side of the parousia (Christ’s Return), unrelated to discipline but part of God’s mysterious providence in a fallen world? But must we always decide? If a little self-examination shows us how to improve we ought to improve. But there are times when all that the Christian can responsibly do is to trust his heavenly Father in the midst of the darkness and pain.[[7]](#footnote-7)”

God uses the local church to help in this area. We can ask a trusted friend to see if, in light of Scripture, there is something we need to change. God’s love for His children is unwavering. Provided that we are willing to follow Jesus, He will be faithful to lead[[8]](#footnote-8) and correct along the way - that’s what a good shepherd does.

But what about the second question of God’s purposes? The Jonah example I gave earlier? Maybe you know that God uses your suffering for his good ends, you just don’t believe that those ends are good *for you*? Quite frankly, you aren’t interested in his purposes if they’re going to cost this much. A few thoughts for you here:

1. If you really don’t trust God’s plans for you, if you really don’t want to be made like Jesus, I think you should question whether or not you’re a Christian. Are you following Christ *for Christ?* Or for some other list of benefits you think you’re entitled to? Christ will always be there. Those other benefits won’t.
2. But this is a common struggle for Christians. You are struggling for control of your life. You want your life one way. God wants it another way. What’s going to happen? Well, if you’re Jonah, God will pursue you to the depths of the sea to get his way with you. That can be a terrifying prospect. He will win. I promise you. And yet I can also assure you that God’s way really is good for you. He has promised that. How to struggle through this? We’ll talk about this much more in the next two weeks. But in short, pray for faith in God’s goodness. You know he is good, but as Jonathan Edwards put it, you have not “ascertained” his goodness. You have not experienced him satisfyingly as good for you. Pray for faith in God’s goodness, spend time reading of his goodness to you in his word, and then talk with good Christian friends about what it looks like to believe in God’s goodness *for you.* Your job is to submit yourself to him. Not reluctantly, but gladly. Knowing that he cares for you.
3. **Conclusion**

Five unbiblical reactions to suffering. The alternative? To trust the real God as revealed in Scripture. How we do that is the topic of our class the next two weeks as we try to unpack the idea of struggling for faith in God’s sovereignty and goodness.

QUESTIONS?

1. See Gen. 3:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is not to say that we aren’t called to persevere in the Christian life; we are (e.g. 2 Tim. 2:3)! The point is that our perseverance must be rooted in the grace and power of God, not ourselves (e.g. 2 Tim. 2:1-2). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *The Grace of God, the Will of Man,* by Clark H. Pinnock (ed.), pg. 25-26 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Open Theists essentially imply that God makes mistakes because of the uncertainty of the future. In other words, He may ‘predict’ one thing while something else happens. How could we trust a God who makes mistakes? [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See 12:4 “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.” The context is about Christians fighting sin. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Paul illustrates this positively in 2 Cor. 12 when he welcomes a thorn in his flesh that God would use to curtail his pride. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *How Long O Lord,* by D.A. Carson, pg. 66 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Psalm 139:23-24 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)