

**Core Seminar**

**Suffering for the Glory of God**

**Class 3: The Future of Suffering**

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***The importance of heaven and hell in the suffering of a Christian***

It is March Madness right now. 64 teams competing for the national championship in college basketball. Some of you may be excited about it – some of you may have no idea (anyone fill out a bracket?). Either way, imagine this: imagine you go to watch the big game – it’s a close one, and you really want your team to win. How do you feel during the game? It’s nerve wracking. As the lead goes back and forth between teams, you’re biting your nails, yelling at the TV, and jumping up and down. Why? Because you don’t know what’s going to happen – who’s going to win. That’s what makes the game exciting and exhilarating when your team wins (now you have bragging rights) – but also so disappointing when you lose.

Well, imagine a second scenario. Imagine you can’t watch the big game tonight because let’s just say there’s something going on like a members meeting. Fortunately, your friend has DVR, so they can record the game for you so you can watch the game tomorrow night. So the next day during work you try to avoid any conversation about the game because you know you’re going to watch it that night but it was such a big game you can’t help but hear your co-worker talk about it. Not only do you hear that your team won – but you hear that they came back from a 15 point deficit in the last five minutes and there was a buzzer beater shot that won the game.

Now when you sit down to watch the game that night – what difference does it make that you know the end? All your friends who waited to watch the game with you sit around the TV, biting their nails, yelling at the TV, jump up and down. In the second period it seems like all is loss. But you are able to sit cool and collected, and enjoy your popcorn because you know who wins in the end.

The same is true for the Christian life. God in His kindness has told us how it all ends. He wins. Satan, sin and death itself are defeated and there will come an end to suffering.

To suffer as a Christian means to suffer with the End of all things firmly fixed in your view. If you don’t, eventually whatever hope you have, will fail and you will be crushed under the weight of reality in this fallen world[[1]](#footnote-1). But when we suffer with the End in mind, our hope burns brightly because it shows that what we get far surpasses anything we give up. And in that hope there is glory to God and joy for us, even in the midst of suffering.

Any answer to the problem of suffering that does not mention the end, cannot be called a Christian one. Now with busy schedules, deadlines, and other responsibilities that call for our attention, it is easy to live as if this life is all there is. We may believe that there is life after death, but push it to the backburner until the idea of eternity becomes more of an insurance policy just in case[[2]](#footnote-2). When we lose sight of heaven, tragedy (big or small) can leave us in despair because it robs us of hope.

Martin Luther understood this reality well and said that he lived as if there were only two days on his calendar: this day and that day. This day referring to today, the one you find yourself in; that day referring to the end, the day when we will stand before God as Judge. So what we’ll do is begin by looking at the end and consider what God is doing with the realities of hell and heaven. With that in mind, we can move back to *this day,* today, and see how those realities help us as we suffer.

***Hell and the Last Day***

Now recently, there has been much debate over the idea of hell. So, let’s consider what the Bible says about Hell…

When the Bible speaks of hell, it describes it as place with suffering so unbearable it will be filled with “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12). It’s described as a furnace of fire, an unquenchable fire where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched (Matt. 13:42, Mk. 9:43, 48). Imagine that, a fire so fierce that it never goes out, *ever;* a place filled with a stench and rottenness so bad the maggots never go away. Those in hell long for an end, but there is no end in sight. Scripture describes it as a place where sins are punished, not for 10 years or 100 years, or 1,000 years, but forever – that’s why **Revelation 14** speaks of the smoke of their torment rising *for ever and ever*. A torment that never allows for rest day or night.

Yet the most terrifying aspect of all is the complete separation from God – of being at odds with Him, of facing His wrath, of knowing you will never be able to be reconciled to the God who you were created to worship (2 Thes. 1:9). And where there is separation from God, there is also separation from our friends, family, and loved ones. No matter what Hollywood or the recent comic strip tells us, Hell is *not* a party where people will be reunited. Those in hell will forever be at odds with each other, constantly torn apart inside by realization of their guilt and shame.

So what does this tell us about God? What’s he doing?

Can you imagine if God looked at the evil in this world - rape, murder, theft, abuse, discrimination – and did nothing about it – even called evil good? That would not be a God who is good - that would be an evil tyrant. But God is not indifferent toward sin, and Hell serves as evidence. Because he is *good* and *just*, He will punish every sin – as God revealed in Exodus 34, He will not leave the guilty unpunished. *Nothing* will be swept under the carpet – He will never be the wicked Judge who takes a bribe, shows partiality, or gets the verdict wrong.

Okay, if that’s what God is doing on *That Day*, what difference does it make for us for how we live *Today*? What difference does it make for us in the midst of suffering?

***Hell and Today***

Imagine someone who has been sinned against – someone has undeservingly done them wrong. Maybe they’ve been cut off in traffic. Maybe their spouse blamed them for something they didn’t do. Maybe someone robbed them. Maybe they’ve been abused by a parent or spouse. Maybe they’ve lost a spouse or child because they professed to be a Christian.

In any of these scenarios (and you can imagine countless others), what does the victim long for? *Justice!* And that longing is good and right – it’s an expression of being made in the image of God. The problem is that vengeance was never meant to be a burden we were designed to carry – it’s too heavy. When you live as if vengeance is up to you, the desire for justice can consume you. You can’t forgive the person because if you do, he might get away with it! And so anger and resentment start to grow inside until you are left bitter.

To those who find themselves suffering under this burden, God mercifully comes along and offers to take it off their shoulders and carry it *for* them. We read in **Romans 12**, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.”

It is God job to avenge, not ours. We can trust God to make right every wrong, to provide justice in every situation. God is much better at getting vengeance than we are. Those who have wronged you will answer to God for it and they *won’t* get away with it. One day, on *That Day*, they will stand before God and answer to Him. If in this life they refused to repent, they will drink the cup of God’s wrath.

So when I see the Biblical picture of hell I can trust God to avenge. More than that, I can let go of the bitterness, the anger, and resentment. Instead of being overcome by evil I can now overcome evil by doing good to that person. When I see Hell for what it is, I don’t want to wish that on my worst enemy.

Now that Christ has come, God can be absolutely just and still forgive sinners – He can, as Paul writes in **Romans 3,** be just and be the one who *justifies*. How does that work? When a person refuses to repent of their sin and trust in Christ, they face God’s wrath on their own – that’s how vengeance comes and God’s justice is preserved. But if that person repents and trusts in Christ, God’s vengeance comes a different way. As an atoning sacrifice, He substitutes Himself in the place of those who trust in Him. Either way, God remains just.

In that sense, the reality of hell has another purpose in our suffering. When we are wronged, we long for justice. But, when we are guilty of the wrong, what do we long for? *Mercy.* Hell isn’t just what *other* people deserve (the Hitlers, Stalins, Bin Ladens); it is what *we* deserve. “There is *no one* righteous, not even one; there is *no one* who understands, *no one* who seeks God…*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God…like the rest, *we were* by nature objects of wrath.[[3]](#footnote-3)” As a result, what is *fair,* what is *just*, is for us to be cast into hell.

If Hell is not real, we’ve not been saved from much. But if it is real, Hell serves as a backdrop to show the depth of God’s mercy, to show us what we’ve been saved *from*!

In the midst of suffering, it’s easy to feel sorry for ourselves and think God *owes* me His kindness; to forget what I *deserve* because of my sin. And when we become ungrateful, suffering becomes unbearable. But, the more we appreciate God’s mercy, the more we’re able to get our focus off of self and take the long-view of things. In that sense, even when I don’t understand everything God is doing, I can rest in the truth that God is good – and that hope is what gets us through.

***That day and Heaven***

On *That Day*, the Day of Judgment, Jesus will separate the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the unrighteous. So we need to consider not only what the Bible says about Hell, but what it says about heaven.

When the Bible speaks of heaven, it describes it as a place where there is no more suffering. Thus we read in **Revelation 21**, ““Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” No longer will there be headaches, cancer, arms that don’t work, eyes that don’t see. There will be no more sadness, no more pain, no more funerals. We will be given new bodies that never break down, never wear out, never get sick.

There will be no more sin to fight[[4]](#footnote-4); no more guilt and shame from broken pasts. We will be with our friends and family who have trusted in Christ and our relationships will be without envy, rivalry, or competition. Instead there will be perfect love – each person caring for the other, able to trust completely.

And best of all, heaven is described as the place where we will dwell with God and be perfectly happy, satisfied in Him. It is impossible to put to words how wonderful this will be. Imagine the *best* pleasure you can imagine in life…God, is infinitely better. Every good in this life is a sign post to the ultimate good of God Himself. He is what is amazing about heaven. If heaven was just about avoiding hell, just about singing songs and sitting on a cloud – all those comforts would eventually become boring. But we will never plumb the depths of the beauty, majesty, wonder of who God is. He will take our breath away again, and again, and again.

So what does heaven teach us about God? What is He up to?

Well if hell shows us the goodness and justice of God, heaven shows us the grace and mercy of God. Heaven is *not* what any of us deserve but it is real and it is enjoyment beyond our imagination. So if this is true about God, what difference does it make for us in the midst of suffering? How should it affect how we live in *This Day, Today*?

***This Day and Heaven***

For one, it reminds us there is an end of suffering – it will not go on forever.

Without hope, suffering will crush us with despair. Think about the suffering we endure because of our bodies. Ever since sin entered the picture our bodies have groaned under the weight of aging – breaking down, getting sick. But the hope we have is that these bodies are only temporary - in the new heavens and new earth, our bodies will be made new. In **Philippians 3:20-21**: “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”

Joni Eareckson Tada who has suffered as a quadriplegic since 1967 explains how this crucial this hope has been for her in her suffering. She writes:

“I still can hardly believe it. I, with shriveled, bent fingers, atrophied muscles, gnarled knees, and no feeling from the shoulders down, will one day have a new body, light, bright, and clothed in righteousness – powerful and dazzling. Can you imagine the hope this gives some spinal cord-injured like me? Or someone who is cerebral palsied, brain-injured, or who has multiple sclerosis? Imagine the hope this gives someone who is manic-depressive. No other religion, no other philosophy promises new bodies, hearts, and minds. Only in the Gospel of Christ do hurting people find such incredible hope.[[5]](#footnote-5)”

Those suffering physically need hope – and the hope of *heaven* is that our bodies will be made new. One thing this points to is that our God cares deeply about our pain and suffering. David writes in **Psalm 56:8** “You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?” He is not indifferent toward our pain, He is not cold and removed. One day, God promises to wipe away *every* tear, to right *every* wrong, remove *every* pain - and *heaven* is reminds us that that such hope is sure.

Another benefit of the reality of heaven for suffering is that it points us to our greatest hope: *to be with God*. It reminds us that our suffering is never wasted. In the 18th century, Jonathan Edwards described heaven as being a place where everyone will be deeply satisfied - who will have a cup and have their cup filled to the brim. Our cups will be of different sizes – some will have a thimble, others a glass, others a five-gallon bucket, but everyone will have a full cup. What makes the difference in the size of the cup? Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 4:17-18,** “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

Did you notice that? Its Paul’s affliction, his suffering has an effect on the weight of glory he experiences in heaven[[6]](#footnote-6) - it’s preparing for him a weight of glory. As we endure *today* with patient faith, suffering has a way of carving out a deeper bowl for us – an expectation and appreciation of heaven when we get there. In this sense, we are helped in our suffering now, knowing that it is being used by God to give us a greater capacity to enjoy Him both now and in eternity!

Our longing for God may be the most important function of the reality of heaven in our suffering. If God is our greatest treasure suffering that once seemed like an insurmountable mountain turns into a speed bump. That’s not to say that it won’t hurt anymore – just that we will not look to our circumstances to satisfy us. Consider Paul’s words in **Philippians 3:8** – “What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.”

Paul had just spent time reflecting on the things that were once valuable to him – his religious heritage, family background, education, and achievements in keeping the law – and now says, all those things are rubbish. In fact, think about what would be excluded from Paul’s list that he considers rubbish. *Nothing*! So whether his health, his relationships, his reputation – everything goes into the rubbish category, *when* he compares it to the surpassing value of knowing Christ. In that sense, His present love for Christ and hope to one day be with Him would be untouchable. He could be wasting away on the outside, but renewed on the inside. No one worries about their trash being ruined or stolen.

**How can we grow in this? A few suggestions:**

* Read God’s word
  + Meditate on Revelation 4-5; 21-22
  + Meditate on Psalm 2 – the Lord laughs, scoffs at those seeking to derail his program – our future is certain.
  + Reflect on 1 Corinthians 15 – promise of a new body that works
* Pray
  + Pray for heart of wisdom to number days rightly (Ps. 90)
  + Examine your schedule – are you so busy that your focus is always on now? Need to trim down to
  + Pray for a heart that is deeply satisfied in God (Psalm 73:25-26; Phi. 3:8; 2 Cor. 4:16-18)
* Good things to read:
  + Jonathan Edwards sermon “Heaven, a World of Love” or “Sinners in the hands of an angry God.”
* Sing Hymns that help you reflect on heaven:
  + It is well
  + Jerusalem my happy home
  + Lo He comes
  + How sweet and awful is the place
  + Hark I hear the harps eternal
  + There is a happy land
  + The sands of time are sinking
  + I will glory in my Redeemer

1. See 1 Thes. 4:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We need to pray as Moses in Psalm 90:12 asking God to “Teach us to number our days aright that we may gain a heart of wisdom. This after considering the brevity of life: “The length of our days is seventy years – or eighty, if we have the strength; yet the span is but trouble and sorrow, for *they quickly pass, and we fly away*” (Ps. 90:10). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rom. 3:10-11, 23; Eph. 2:3b [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rev. 21:27 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *When God Weeps* by Joni Eareckson Tada and Steven Estes, pg. 216 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. Matt 5:11-12 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)