

**Life on Life 301**  
**Class 6 June 6, 2021**  
**Helping Those Who Suffer**

- I. **Observations on Suffering**
- A. Suffering can be defined as “undergoing pain, distress or hardship.”
  - B. Suffering can be physical, relational, spiritual, emotional, or circumstantial.
  - C. To an extent, suffering is defined by the one experiencing it – what qualifies for one may not qualify for another.
    - 1. “What you think about yourself, life, God, and others will profoundly affect the way you think about, interact with, and respond to the difficulty that comes your way.” - Tripp<sup>1</sup>
    - 2. How do I relate to another person’s suffering if I don’t think what they’re going through qualifies as real pain?
  - D. **The less dependent we are on Christ**, the greater our susceptibility to experiencing life’s hardships as suffering. Philippians 4:10-15
    - 1. Paul says we can learn to **prosper in want** (*suffering is a type of want, though want is not necessarily suffering*) as well as **plenty**. Philippians 4:12
    - 2. When Stephen was being stoned to death, he committed himself to the Lord. Jesus and tells Him not to hold this against them. Certainly, the experience was suffering, but because of fixing his eyes on Christ, that was not his dominant experience. Acts 7:59-60
    - 3. How does the experience of Stephen line up with those who you are counseling? Asked another way, do you see the same attitude in your counselee as in Stephen?
  - E. **Suffering can cause you to question the motives or goodness of God.** “You cannot go through things like this without wondering what God is doing and without at least being tempted to doubt his wisdom, goodness, and love.”<sup>2</sup> - Tripp
  - F. **Our chief job when counseling someone suffering is not to judge it or alleviate it.** Our job is to enter their suffering and to help them find the Lord’s perspective and presence in the midst of their suffering as He gives us opportunity and they give us access.
    - 1. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Romans 12:15
    - 2. God is near to and binds up the brokenhearted. Psalm 34:18; 147:3
    - 3. God’s perspective on suffering will help them and His presence makes suffering bearable. Philip Yancey, in his book, *Where is God When it Hurts?* aptly summarizes Solzhenitsyn’s message in his novel, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* as “Faith in God may not get you out of the camp, but it is enough to see you through each day.” (See article on page 4 of these notes)
  - G. As counselors we are normally invited into the suffering of others. As believers should we wait to be invited into the suffering of our friends? How about as leaders?

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<sup>1</sup> Tripp, Paul David. *Suffering: Gospel Hope When Life Doesn’t Make Sense* (p. 27). Crossway. Wheaton, IL 2018

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* (p. 20)

1. Romans 15:1-3 – The “strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves.”
2. 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15 - We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people.

## II. A Few Key Passages on Suffering

### a. Romans 8:16-39

1. Our present suffering is far less than the glory to be revealed.
2. Suffering is universal. Suffering is the common state of mankind in a fallen world. For believers, life this side of eternity is as close to hell as we will ever experience. Romans 8:16 -22; see also 1 Peter 5:9-10; 2 Corinthians 4:7-18; James 1:2; John 16:3
3. The Holy Spirit inhabits our suffering and intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.
4. Suffering does not mean we are separated from a loving, caring God.
5. For the believer suffering has the added component of our knowing that the next world is better. 2 Corinthians 5
6. Romans 8:28-29 is given to us in the context of suffering. We tend to apply this verse to life in general. We are conformed to the image of Christ in the context of suffering. He is known as the suffering Servant. (Colossians 1.24)

### b. Job - Some suffering is undeserved

1. All suffering goes through God’s fingers. God is sovereign over our all aspects of our life, even suffering.
  - a. Job 1:8
  - b. Job 2:3
  - c. Job 38 – Where were you?
2. Suffering brings loss and grief – learn to identify and accept those feelings.
3. If our counselees are suffering due to the sin of others or due to living in a fallen world, how do we help them identify the loss and grief?
  - a. What did Job friends do? Is that our response?
  - b. How do we help our counselee to identify if their own or someone else sin is at the root of their problem?
4. Suffering tempts us to demand that God explain Himself.

### c. 2 Corinthians - Suffering for the cause of Christ.

1. 2 Corinthians 1:1-11
  - a. Verse 3 - Our suffering, like Paul’s, can be used for the good of others.
  - b. Verse 4 – God comforts us in our affliction so we can comfort others.
  - c. Verse 5 – We have abundant comfort in Christ.
  - d. Verse 8 and 9 - Suffering can bring us to the point of despair even as it is used to help others.

- e. Verse 9 – 10 - Our ultimate comfort in suffering is the future hope of the resurrection.
- 2. 2 Corinthians 4:7-17
  - a. Verse 11 – for we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.
  - b. Verse 17 – momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all compare.
- 3. 2 Corinthians 11:16 – 12:10
  - a. Paul could have boasted in his exemplary service to the Lord and in the great revelations he had received. He chose instead to boast about the power of God manifesting itself through his weakness.
  - b. Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 – God’s power is perfected in weakness.

### III. How to Think Through Suffering? (© ACBC Training Workshop on Trials)

- A. Biblical responses of God’s children in trials and suffering:
  - 1. 2 Corinthians 5:9-10 - God’s children are responsible to please Christ since we will give an account. This is true even when we hurt, don’t understand or are in pain.
  - 2. Don’t pray for God to just help you “hang in there” through the trial and suffering. Ask God to help you **grow in the midst of the difficulty** to be more like Jesus - Romans 5:3-5; 8:28-29; James. 1:2-4.
- B. Ask yourself:
  - 1. Could God have stopped this? (Job 1:8-12, 2:3-6; Lamentations 3:37-38)
  - 2. Did He? Not at this time.
  - 3. If He has chosen not to stop it at this time, why not? How do we discuss this? How can we speak to a rape victim, the father of a dying child, the wife who has just found that her husband is unfaithful about God allowing this trial in their life?
- C. God allows trials and sufferings for many reasons. Here are a few common ones:
  - 1. Unconfessed sins:
    - a. 1 Corinthians 11:30 – some are dead because they have not judged the body rightly.
    - b. 2 Kings 5:15-27 – Some suffering is the direct result of sin in our lives. Use caution here – Job’s counselors assumed erroneously this was the reason for Job’s trials.
  - 2. To chastise His children:
    - a. Psalm 119:65 - 72 – We learn discernment and knowledge through our trials.
    - b. Hebrews 12:5-11 - God’s chastisement results in the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

- c. God wants to increase our usefulness by pruning - John 15:2; 2 Corinthians 1:3-9; 2 Peter. 1:5-8
  - d. To remind us this isn't heaven and we live in a fallen world
    - i. Genesis 3:8-19
    - ii. Romans 8:22-24 - All of creation groans under the weight of sin caused by the fall. We all suffer to one degree or another because of this.
  - e. To show us that other people's sins have an effect on us. - Ephesians 6:4; Joshua 7:10-11; Jonah 1
  - f. To allow us to reap what we sow (a natural consequence to our own choices – Galatians 6:7-8; Proverbs 5:22
3. To show us our weakness and prompt us to depend on God. - 2 Corinthians 1:8-9; 12:7-10
  4. To have us realize that we have placed our hope somewhere else or have spread it out between God and self/circumstances/other people/possessions, which is idolatry. Our hope is to be squarely fixed upon God alone and His promises (1 Peter 1:13; Hebrews 6:19). At times we don't even know we have "little hopes" elsewhere until God allows a trial to come and reveal them to us.
  5. To enlarge our appreciation of His sufficiency. - 2 Corinthians 4:7; 12:7-10
  6. To test and strengthen our faith. 1 Peter 1:6-7; 4:12
  7. To create opportunities to witness for Christ - Philippians 1:12ff
  8. To develop Christ-like character - James 1:2-5
  9. To cause us to recognize our need of one another in the Body of Christ and to draw us closer to one another - 38 One Another's; 1 Corinthians 12:25; Romans 12:15; Galatians 6:2
  10. To always bring glory to Himself - John 9:1-7; Job 1:2; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31
  11. It drives us to God's Word - Psalm 119:71

#### **IV. Biblical Comforts Available Through Christ (© ACBC Workshop)**

*At your table, take turns reading these relevant passages.*

- A. Recall the comfort that the Father is providentially carrying out His decreed will for our lives: His will is good, perfect and acceptable. Proverbs 16:1-4
- B. Christ prays on our behalf. John 17:15-21; Romans 8:34
- C. His Holy Spirit prays for us and intercedes for us. Romans 8:26
- D. His grace is sufficient. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10
- E. He always promises victory **in**, not necessarily deliverance **from**. 2 Corinthians 2:14
- F. There is no temptation that is too powerful. 1 Corinthians 10:13
- G. The local church body is to live out the "One Anothers". John 13:14
- H. Our earthly life is short compared to eternity in Heaven. Romans 8:18
- I. Heaven is our home and it is sure. John 14:1-3; Hebrews 6:19
- J. Christ is soon to return. 1 Peter 1:13

V. **Discuss (Suggested by Paul Tripp)**

*At the table continue your discussion by answering these questions.*

- A. Why might it be easier to justify selfishness in the midst of suffering?
- B. In what ways might you be a more effective ambassador in the midst of suffering?
- C. How does the presence of God enable you to minister to others and put their needs above your own?

VI. **Homework**

- A. Memorize either Romans 5:3-4 or James 1:2-3
- B. Read Buried Treasure excerpt from Philip Yancey's book, ***Where is God When it Hurts?*** and be prepared to discuss the message of the article with your table next week. Where have you seen this to be true? How can you use this truth in counseling someone?
- C. Read Paul Tripp's "**Ministry in Suffering**" article. Be prepared to discuss next week.
- D. Read Ed Welch's Article, "**What is God Up To? The Temptation to Overinterpret Suffering.**"

## Buried Treasure

Excerpted from *Where Is God When It Hurts*

by Philip Yancey Zondervan, ©1997

Following the biblical pattern, our search for meaning should move in a forward-looking direction, toward the results of suffering, rather than dwelling on its cause.

Frankly, to me much suffering would remain meaningless if we spent all our efforts on the unanswerable "Why?" questions. Why did Solzhenitsyn have to spend eight years in a hard labor camp just for making a casual criticism of Stalin in a letter to a friend? Why did millions of Jews have to die to fulfill the whims of a crazed dictator? Such suffering is meaningless in itself, and will remain so unless the sufferer, like a miner searching for diamonds in a vein of coal, finds in it a meaning.

Victor Frankl, who spent time in one of Hitler's camps, said, "Despair is suffering without meaning." Frankl and Bruno Bettelheim extracted meaning from the senseless suffering of the Holocaust: observing the behavior of human beings in the extreme conditions of the camps gave them insights that formed the basis for all their later work. For Elie Wiesel and others, "bearing witness" became the meaning. They now devote themselves to honoring those who did not survive.

In prison Dostoyevski pored over the New Testament and the lives of the saints. Prison became, for him and later for his countryman Solzhenitsyn, a crucible of religious faith. Both describe a process in which, first, the blunt reality of human evil convinced them of the need for redemption. Then, through the living witness of believers in the camps, they saw the possibility of transformation. As Solzhenitsyn elegantly express it in his classic *One Day in the Life Of Ivan Denisovich*, **faith in God may not get you out of the camp, but it is enough to see you through each day.**

Although my own suffering seems trivial in comparison with these pioneers, I too strive to extract meaning from it. I begin the biblical promise that suffering can produce something worthwhile in me. I go through a list like that in Romans 5, where Paul mentions perseverance, character, hope, and confidence. "How does suffering accomplish these?" I ask myself. It produces perseverance, or steadiness, by slowing me down and forcing me to turn to God; it produces character by calling on my reserves of inner strength. I continue through the list, asking how God can be involved in bringing meaning to the suffering process.

John Donne spoke of suffering as a kind of "treasure in bullion." Because it is not coined into currency, the bullion does not always help us defray expenses here on earth. But as we get nearer and nearer our home, heaven, the treasure "that may lie in his bowels, as gold in a mine" takes on eternal value, a weight of glory. If we turn to God in trust, the affliction itself can be redeemed, by helping to form our character, Christ's own image.

We might use a more contemporary analogy to express the same thought. Suffering can be what economists call a "frozen asset." It may not look remotely like an asset at the time, but gradually we can find meaning in it, an enduring meaning that will help to transform the pain.

## MINISTRY IN SUFFERING

© Paul David Tripp – Wednesday's Word 9/17/14

We've been spending some time in Psalm 4, learning from David as he responds to deep and personal suffering. Last week we discussed the idea of Conditional Worship, which is the temptation to only praise God when we experience pleasurable circumstances.

Today I want to talk about one of the last things we think about in the midst of suffering - **ministering to those around us.**

Let's be honest. Because of sin, we're self-centered people. We expect others to serve us and treat us as the most important item on the agenda. When suffering enters our door, why would that change? In fact, our selfishness may become more exposed under trial.

In suffering, we expect others to serve us, this time with pity and compassion. And, we probably feel as if we're even more important, considering the current circumstances. "Don't you know what I'm going through? You should pay extra attention to me!"

David does something different. **He ministers.** Psalm 4:6 - "There are many who say, 'Who will show us some good? Lift up the light of your face upon us, O Lord!'"

David is writing poetically, so let me try to summarize what's happening. David has a loyal band of companions who have been with him through the entire ordeal, and they approach David and say, "Who will show us some good?" That's another way of saying, "What's going to happen to us now? How can this situation get better for us?"

In that moment, I would struggle not to make it all about me. I would struggle not to compare my suffering with their suffering, naming their trial as "less severe" than my own. I would struggle not to pass off their question entirely and sulk in the corner, meditating on how hard my life has been.

I would guess that David struggled with similar thoughts; after all, he's no biblical hero. But empowered by grace, David prays for his companions. He puts aside his own suffering and asks God to reveal himself to those around him. "Lord, what my people need is to experience your presence. Would you be so tender and loving and kind to shine your face on us? We need to see you!"

David is shepherding his people and interceding on their behalf. He sees the needs of their soul and prioritizes their spiritual care over his own. Rather than making the trial all about himself, David speaks gospel truth to others.

What a beautiful picture of selfless ministry that we should pursue! It won't be easy; it's so easy to justify selfishness in the midst of personal suffering. But like David, we can reach out to God and ask for his presence. He is always near, and his grace enables you to think of others even in the most trying of times.

## What Is God Up To? The Temptation to Overinterpret Suffering

By Ed Welch

May 21, 2020

“What do you think God is doing? Why is he allowing this pandemic?” he asked. Then he added, “I know you have thought a lot about this.”

I had not thought about it. I was “settled in” with my wife; we had plenty to do, and I left the details of COVID-19 news to her. But his questions—which are more global than personal—tap into something important. This pandemic is the first time that many of us have reckoned with a particular trouble that affects nearly everyone, and it has caused us to think more about God’s ways. Though the answers across the body of Christ will have different emphases, there are at least three matters on which we can have broad agreement.

As Christ’s church, we should be able to agree that:

1. *We tend to overinterpret suffering.* There is something about the human mind that prefers answers. When life-changing events befall us, we often interpret them as highly personal messages. We do this with individuals. Every person whose troubles are known to a church community receives specific “biblical” interpretations for the trouble, or is asked, “What is God trying to teach you?” We do the same thing with corporate and national struggles. Perhaps we want some sense of control by knowing precise causes. Perhaps we want to find a unique mission and purpose. Or perhaps we see how the Old Testament makes connections between human behavior and divine consequences and assume that we who have the Spirit should be able to make similar connections. *Whatever our reasons, we overinterpret suffering.* At our worst, we believe that the suffering of other people is God’s discipline upon them. Meanwhile, we wonder if our troubles indicate God’s judgment on us as his church, or if he is planting hidden signs in our suffering that will lead us to better decisions and back into his favor. We prefer answers.

But such answers are not ours to have. Our present, common hardship is a time for us to acknowledge that we are mere humans, weak and dependent children before our Father, who is both at work in the suffering, and has a steadfast love for us that never ceases (Lam 3:22).<sup>[1]</sup> That is enough. If we want more details, we know that the kingdom of God has come in Christ, but it grows gradually, in conflict with the dark kingdom, and this conflict is overlaid on a groaning creation with its ever-mutating viruses.

Beyond this, our common hardships are not a time to try to read the mind of God. Rather, they are a time to grow in trust and humility before him.

2. *Our aim is, and continues to be, to know Christ.* From that safe and sane place of humility and dependence, we set out to know Jesus Christ more. In my chronological reading of Scripture, I was in



Judges when the pandemic hit and wanted to decontaminate from the atrocities that increased with each judge. What better way to get refreshed than to go to the apostle Paul and be drawn along by his pastoral letters about Jesus. Given the present difficulties, I thought something that went especially big was needed to aid my soul, something that had all of creation in view, both things visible and invisible. So, Colossians it was.

In just the first chapter, Paul cannot stop saying the name of Jesus. Jesus created all things, he is the head of the church and holds it together, he reconciled those who were alienated from God through his crucifixion. And, if you are looking for mysteries revealed, look no further than how he has brought Jews and Gentiles to himself, and that his indwelling Spirit produces in us the hope of glory. “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col 1:19-20).

When we feel as though we are in the dark and need more interpretive knowledge, we look to Jesus, meditate on his sacrificial love, and speak of this to others as we also learn from them. Doing this won’t answer our immediate questions about what is happening in the world, but it helps answer an even bigger question: How can I know and trust in the One who created all things and established their course?

*3. Our response to a crisis is to walk in spiritual wisdom (Col 1:9).* From the exalted Christ to the details of life today—that is the path Paul always travels. He prays that we would walk worthy of our high calling in Jesus, pleasing him, bearing fruit through words and deeds, and being strengthened “for all endurance and patience with joy” (Col 1:11). Then, we work out the specifics. Show kindness to a neighbor, ask forgiveness of someone in our household, sing worship songs, pray for the needs of others, read Scripture aloud, bring order to our living space, consider how we can show generosity to those in greater need, and the list goes on. This is how we respond to a crisis.

We have rarely shared an international crisis quite like COVID-19. It stands alone as a burden common to us all. While its impact seems to beg for unique insights and interpretations, restrained explanations are best. Then notice what God actually is doing. For example, the pandemic has been accompanied by a significant uptick in those who log on to streaming worship services searching for food for their soul. With this in mind, we pray that this time will strengthen the church and make Jesus more known to the world.

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[1] Lamentations *does* have a specific interpretation: God’s people had forsaken their covenant vows, and the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians. I am extracting from Lamentations a thread that goes through different kinds of suffering.

