

Knowing God Through Suffering & Persecution I (1/21/24 SS)

(Introduction)

Welcome all of you to the first class in a new block of study for our adult equip class, “Knowing God Through Suffering and Persecution.”

From the title alone, you can determine that this is a very broad and sweeping topic that touches upon the experience of each and every one of us at some level as we live out our days in a fallen world.

In today’s introductory lesson it is my mission to map out for you our way ahead in order to clarify the overarching purpose (or vision if you will) of our study.

It is easy to lose sight of the purpose/vision of any study as you begin to immerse yourself in the details. But our intention is to keep it simple and keep coming back to it, something like a large mountain towering over a valley. As you traverse the valley, you can always look up and see the mountain to get your bearings because it does not move.

* Consider with me some organizing thoughts.

I. The Purpose of Our Study Identified (where are we going?)

The answer that is hidden in plain sight (what do you think it is?)
TO KNOW GOD!!

J.I. Packer, “The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know God.”

Let me expand on that a bit by asking you a simple but keep theological question that has a very short textual answer.

What is eternal life?

(John 17:3) “and this is eternal life... etc.”

Let’s turn to the text and take a closer look.

Woven into the fabric of the mutual glorification of the Father and the Son in the loving death of Christ upon the cross is the rule and authority given to our Lord to grant eternal life to all the Father has given Him. {All the Father gives me shall come to me (6:37)} And it follows that {eternal} life is bound up in the knowledge of the {eternal} one, not a mere intellectual understanding (although that is included). But a personal relationship/fellowship/trust/faith, and experiential knowledge in the depth of the soul.

** You know that, but the point I want to drive home is this knowledge is never static. Our determination always is to expand/deepen our knowledge of God and His ways. {"That I may know Him" (Phil. 3:10)} A lofty goal indeed.

"To know God and to know Jesus Christ whom He has sent." Simple enough/I can remember that.

But how do we get there? What does that entail?

II. Pathway of Our Study Described

Let me give you a little gray haired/unsolicited counsel (one of my gifts).

Young Christian/old weathered saint of God or somewhere in between.

Hear Me! Any purpose/goal/vision in the Christian life (or life in general for that matter) that does not include a plan of how to achieve that purpose/goal/vision is an exercise in futility!!

{Empty talk/babbling of a dreamer ... interviewing for a job/listening to pressure(?)}

I'm here to lay out for you a plan. A pathway to accomplish our goal/purpose of knowing God in a deeper, experiential way through suffering and persecution.

Now how well we execute that plan is still up in the air, but we have a plan.

{You will have to grade us on execution, and remember "unless the Lord build the house, those who build it build in vain. (Ps. 127)}

First step of our plan:

1) Develop a Biblical Theological Framework

This framework will have a special focus. Seeking a better understanding of suffering and evil in light of God's sovereign rule over every thread of providence in the tapestry of His redemptive purpose for the world.

Where is God and what is He up to when bad things happen. Often times when bad things happen to His own people.

- a) Wife of a young pastor, mother of 5, brutally murdered in a home invasion. Where is God?
- b) Godly Christian man or woman, with growing influence in a local church, struck down in a matter of weeks with aggressive stage 4 cancer. Where is God?

- c) Thousands of Christians killed for their faith every year in North Korea/Somalia/Nigeria/Sudan. Where is God?
- d) 3,000 killed 9/11/01, 300K Indonesian tsunami 12/26/04(?). Where is God?
- e) 6 million Jews in Holocaust/ 1400 Oct 7, 2023
- f) Millions upon millions lives taken violently from the womb. Radical women demanding the right to take the life of unborn.
- g) So called natural disasters/murderous dictators/genocide/wars/famine.

** In all the suffering/tragedy/pain in the world... Where is God? And what is He up to?

** Even the Scriptures in the OT and NT cry out to God with these questions in the face of the apparent triumph of evil in the world.

Survey (Ps. 10:1-4, Ps. 13:1-4, Ps. 79:1-10, Ps. 89:46-49) or that gripping text in (Rev. 6:10), "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth."

Sobering. You ever have those questions come into your mind? I sure have.

Perhaps by being far removed from much (if not all) of those examples we are not troubled by it.

We firmly believe that God is sovereign/omnipotent/wise and perfectly good. Working all things according to His perfect plan/according to all His holy will.

Some of which (much or most) is beyond our understanding. (Duet. 24:29)

And we leave it there and pillow our heads in peaceful sleep, and that is all true/that is a proper Biblical response.

** But then something happens in your life, and jolts you to the core of your being.

- a) Your husband dies suddenly without warning.
- b) Your wife diagnosed with aggressive (?), 6 months to live.
- c) Your child/grandchild murdered on the mission field.

** It is then, dear brethren, that the question of "Where is God" and "what is He up to" takes on a different dimension. You are now in the crucible of suffering/your life has been turned upside down/some evil has been perpetrated against you. The experiences of the Psalmist are now yours.

*** Here is my point, listen to me!!**

** It is imperative that you have a solid Biblical theological framework welded into your mind and heart before the inevitable reality of suffering and evil touches your life and experience.

** In the midst of confusion/shock/emotional trauma it is the things you know about God that will give you peace and stability. You will never find comfort in what you don't know. {What you know will cut through the mystery and darkness to give light of the knowledge of the glory, etc.}

Now obviously the more we know will result in a more stable framework.

To help us establish that framework we will be using the book by DA Carson. Introduce Carson's book as syllabus. {Not a book study/but good to read}

This book will help us to establish the "what" of our study.

This section of our study will take up eight lessons (including this one).

Sampling 1) What happened to our world, 2) Job, 3) Does God experience suffering, 4) Mystery of providence, 5) Comfort of providence.

Now with our theological framework in place, we move along our pathway to what I am calling :

2) Exploring the Spiritual Experiences that Accompany Suffering/Persecution

Regardless of how well you understand and grasp the theological framework, you must deal with the shock/numbing pain/confusion/emotional turmoil that accompanies the experience of suffering/persecution. {different levels/intensity yes, but still painful}

And this section is the "so what" of our study. What are the dangers we face?/where do we turn for comfort and hope?/We need more than just the theological framework. We need to understand the matters of the heart if we are to have a well rounded/well grounded understanding.

For this section of the study there will be four lessons drawn and developed from this book.

- Introduce "Suffering," Paul David Tripp
- Spiritual Dynamics and Dangers We Face in Suffering (2 lessons)
- Spiritual comforts that are Ours

RECAP

Purpose (goal) – To Know God Through... etc.

Pathway: 1) Develop Biblical theological framework (the "what" of our study)

2) Explore spiritual experiences that accompany sufferers ("so what" of our living)

Two very brief qualifying remarks and we're done.

1) It is not our purpose in this study to delve in to all the specifics of suffering that may touch our lives, will deal with a few/but not our focus as I hope was made clear. But I do want to make this general statement:

- Suffering for the people of God takes on a broad range of experience according to the Scriptures. One of the predominant themes is that of physical persecution. Thankfully that has not been our personal experience (by and large) in the West. But it is the present experience of a huge portion of believers throughout the world. Therefore we want to avoid the tendency we may have to ignore it as if it did not exist.
{As we move through the study, seek to maintain a proper balanced perspective, Suffering/persecution because you are a Christian, Suffering as a Christian in a fallen world as we ??? following after Christ, ??? us into conflict (world/flesh/devil).}

2) There is another dimension of our study that demands a careful balance.

There is much about God revealed in Scripture relevant to suffering and evil in the world that is clear/plain/certain.

Conversely there is much that is ambiguous/lacking clarity/mysterious.

We must, as in all study of the Bible, keep our focus upon the cross of Jesus Christ, as we shall seek to do in our study of "Knowing God Through Suffering and Persecution."

(Heb. 5:8) "As though He was a son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered."
(Suffering servant)

QUESTIONS

1. Why is it important to "know God" in the midst of our suffering and pain? {stability, peace, hope}
2. Why important to have theological structure in place prior to inevitable suffering and pain? {confusion, fog of war, fog of suffering}
3. Read (James 5:10-11) Job stands as an example of suffering/patience/perseverance. Give me some thoughts on Job's foundational theological understanding of God found in his words (Job 1:20f).
{Sovereignty/creator & creature relationship, fear of God, love and reverence, run to God}
4. Your thoughts on some dangers we face (spiritually). We experience suffering without a theological structure.