

The Supremacy of God in Missions Through Suffering and Prayer

Week 5

(slightly edited from CHBC's Core Seminar)

Recap of first 4 lessons.

- Ultimate point of missions: the God's glory
- God's redemption plan calling others to Himself as seen through scripture
- Urgency and clarity: doctrine of hell and the need for Jesus
- Means and the goal: churches.

As you may have noticed, we are front-loading theological classes to help us build a foundation for how we think about missions. The latter half of the class we'll get more into the practical steps of "doing missions" on a team.

Today we're considering the doctrine of suffering. Particularly interested in suffering as a result of being a believer – but this doesn't discount suffering over health, family relationships, etc.

Why are we studying suffering in a missions class?

- It's NOT because only missionaries suffer.
 - As we'll see later, the Bible tells us to expect it in this life, and to particularly be ready to be rejected and suffer for being associated with Christ
 - But even though we can all expect to suffer, this particular class is particularly helpful, I think to this mostly-American audience
- So while all Christians do suffer – and suffer for the gospel – we can even more expect Christians who go out to places where Christ is not known to suffer in a different way, perhaps more directly...more obviously.

- A careful reading of the New Testament and of more recent missionary history does seem to indicate that suffering of an unusual sort has accompanied most bold advances of the Gospel.
 - [Riot in Ephesus under Paul's preaching, persecution in Thessalonica in Acts 17]
- Consider the example of Adoniram Judson...When he was in Burma, he lost 2 wives and 7 out of 13 children, in addition to colleague after colleague.¹

"If I had not felt certain that every additional trial was ordered by infinite love and mercy, I could not have survived my accumulated suffering."

-Adoniram Judson

Similarly, one former missionary from GRBC says that he could not have survived living in Central Asia for 13 years without his Reformed faith. Knowing that God was the one in control during all of his suffering and also knowing that God is the one who saves people was a tremendous comfort to him.

- Add to that the stories of hundreds or even thousands of missionaries who have been beaten, starved, lost children, been imprisoned, lost their health, and even died as a result of going out with the Gospel. The history of the advance of the Gospel is, from one point of view, a long and consistent story of suffering servants.
- Why this class?
 - If you're considering serving overseas as a missionary: I hope this class shores up your view of suffering as a biblical

¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/how-few-there-are-who-die-so-hard>

category – I hope it gives you right-expectations for how to think about living and working overseas.

- If you're a member simply more interested in missions and how we send/support, I pray this class encourages you to persevere in your own suffering here, and also equips you to better pray for and encourage our workers who are fighting for faithfulness, contentment, joy, even as we meet this morning.

So we'll explore God's will regarding suffering in missions by asking 3 questions:

- Where does suffering come from?
- Why does God allow/ordain suffering?
- How do we persevere amidst suffering/persecution? What's the Christian's response to all this suffering?

We'll start with the Biblical origin of suffering, and the answer for why suffering.

WHERE DOES SUFFERING COME FROM?

So, to begin with, where does suffering come from? Go back to the beginning of the Bible. God creates everything good. You'll remember that continuing refrain “**and it was good**^[2]” that runs through the first two chapters of Genesis. No sin, no suffering; everything just the way it was supposed to be. Then Adam and Eve disobey God and they immediately experience the pain of being separated from Him.

They had known the unhindered fellowship with God but now they hid from Him (**Gen. 2:8**) and found themselves at odds with each other (**Gen. 3:7, 12**). In **Genesis 3:16-19** we see the curse on creation because of sin,

Judgment brought physical, emotional and relational pain; judgment even cursed the earth itself. Rebellion against God ushered pain and hardship into human history and by Genesis 5, Adam's dead, and we are faced with a second refrain: we see Noah's descendants living progressively shorter lives and we read, "and he died...and he died...and he died" as we see death continue to conquer.

But, of course, the Bible doesn't end there. And by the time we come to the end of the Bible we once again see that vision of paradise.

In **Revelation 21:1-4** we read:

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.'"

That is the end of suffering. And it's the end of sin—for in the new heavens and new earth, **"Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life"** (Rev. 21:27).

As Don Carson points, out,

"Between the beginning and the end of the Bible, there is evil and there is suffering. But the point to be observed is that from the perspective of the Bible's large-scale storyline, the two are

profoundly related: evil is the primal cause of suffering, rebellion is the root of pain, sin is the source of death.^[3]”

So why is there suffering? Well, the origin of suffering is sin. In that sense, all suffering is because of sin. But does this mean that every time we suffer it’s because we’ve sinned and God is punishing us for it? NO.

Is suffering normal for Christians?

Yes. Consider John 15:

John 15:20: “Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.”

Jesus warns his disciples that just as evil men persecuted him, they will also persecute us.

The Bible acknowledges that our very association with Christ means we will face trials or persecution.

*1 Peter 4:1 & 12: Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin... 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.*

Peter tells us that thinking about Christ’s suffering, and the likelihood of our own suffering, is something that we should do to “arm” ourselves for the Christian life...in order to prepare ourselves for suffering beforehand.

And of course, we also understand as Christians that because we serve an all-powerful, omniscient God, he must allow/ordain suffering.

Why is it that Christians suffer? Well, according to Scripture, part of the answer is that they suffer because God wills it. The Bible does not limit the picture of the saints' suffering to God merely permitting it, allowing it to happen...it is ultimately pictured as an outworking of His sovereign will.

- *Acts 4:27-28: "...for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."*

Here we are told that the greatest suffering in all of history, the suffering of Christ, was not something that God merely allowed to happen, but rather, that it was something He decided should happen. God is not a victim, passively allowing suffering. In this case, He was the all-powerful agent, even directing the plans of wicked men to accomplish His good and holy purpose.

And what does that mean for the Christian? Finish out 1 Peter 4:12 -19

As we suffer, so we share in Christ's sufferings. What does the Bible call us? BLESSED. Entrusted to a FAITHFUL Creator!

Friends – this should provide a strong antidote to the prosperity gospel.

WHY DOES GOD ALLOW/ORDAIN SUFFERING?

That brings us to the most difficult "Why" of the morning. Why would a good and loving God appoint, will, purpose, and destine his children for suffering? Well, just looking through Scripture we can find a number of reasons.

We'll first consider why God might allow suffering in the individual context – how does God use suffering to benefit me personally? Then how does that look like going out, corporately/as a church?

Personal/Individual

- ***Suffering leads to deeper faith and greater holiness***
 - “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (Jas. 1:2-4).
 - Psalm 119:67, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word.”
 - “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame...” (Rom. 5:3b-4).
 - “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.” (Ps. 119:71).
 - As Richard Baxter put it, “*Suffering so unbolts the door of the heart, that the Word hath easier entrance.*[4]”
- ***Suffering loosens our affections in this world, focus them on Him and heaven***
 - 2 Corinthians 1:8b-9: “For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death.
 - **But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.**”
 - 2 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.

- “By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.” (Heb. 11:24-26)
- 1 Peter 1:6-7: In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.
- In all these verses, we’re reminded of the greater joy in our reward and the glory of Christ

But there is also a much bigger reason than our own personal holiness, edification, etc., isn’t there? Based on Scripture, it seems plain that the reason that God ordains, wills, appoints, and destines His people to suffer is because their suffering magnifies the worth of the Gospel of Christ. PROCLAIMS the Gospel. And this is where we’ll find suffering really intersects with missions.

Consider these words from a former missionary from GRBC:

We were being visited by a volunteer group from CHBC led by Andy Johnson. I was lamenting the fact that with all of the things we had suffered and because we had to move so much due to some of the things we suffered, that maybe we really weren’t making all that much of a difference, Andy’s reply was one of those moments that stuck with me and fueled my continuing ministry for years to come. He said to me, “Just the fact that you guys have suffered so much and have remained on the mission field through it all is a testimony to how worthy Christ is. He is worthy of your staying here and enduring these things.” Wow! What an encouragement.

- ***Suffering magnifies the power and worth of Christ***
 - Matthew 14:44-46 – treasure in a field parable
 - In 1 Peter 2:20b-24 we read:
 - “But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. ²¹For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you might follow in his steps. ²²He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”
 - 2 Corinthians 12:9-10: ‘But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.’

- ***Suffering showcases the eternal, amazing hope of the gospel***
 - Consider 1 Peter 3:14-15. “But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.”

- Peter assumes that a life of suffering, if lived well, a life that looks different from the world because it doesn't fear the things the world fears, is a provocative life. And if your life is provocative, there's going to be questions. So be prepared, be ready, to answer them.
- ***Suffering encourages and emboldens other Christians***
 - Philippians 1:14: And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.
 - 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 says, "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, 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."

Here's another account from one of GRBC's members who is a former missionary that illustrates this point:

We heard this story from some local believers. Local believers often grow frustrated and jaded by missionaries who come and go so easily when they encounter the slightest suffering. But there was an older missionary couple who had been in the country for a long time. Some locals who didn't like what they were doing came and beat them up for sharing the Gospel. It was so bad that they had to leave the country to receive medical care. The local believers all assumed that they would never see them again. Miraculously, the couple returned to the field and continued their ministry after a time of recovery. This greatly emboldened the local believers to endure their own suffering. "If Christ is worth it for them," they thought, "then he is surely worth it for us too."

- ***Suffering moves Christians to the places He wants them to go***
 - Acts 8:1; Acts 11:19

- Acts 1, that his followers “will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth[3].”
- Acts 8, “And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles[4].”
- *Suffering displays the value of knowing Christ to a watching world*
 - Philippians 2:14-16:
 - ¹⁴Do all things without grumbling or disputing, ¹⁵that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, ¹⁶holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.
 - In Philippians 3:8, Paul writes, “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”
 - God isn’t glorified when we choose Him *for* His gifts. God is glorified when we choose Him as what is truly valuable over and above everything else.
 - When we lose what this world values and yet don’t lose heart, it tells them that we have grabbed hold of something far more valuable than they ever imagined. And that commends the gospel. And as our lives look increasingly different from those around us, we will shine out.

Let’s pause and consider God’s incredible plan for glorifying Himself – and how He does so in several different ways.

- In the past few classes, we’ve discussed how God desires to glorify Himself. He is the source and the inspiration for

missions. Not only that, the way that He has chosen to glorify Himself displays His grace and His justice.

- But this week, we add to those the fact that God is glorifying Himself even through the means that He has appointed to bring His gospel to the nations – that as His people declare His praises, and persist in suffering, He is glorified as His people show His worth and the worth of His gospel.

Our persevering in the faith – amidst suffering and persecution – glorifies God.

Question for class: *Okay then, if I am not facing persecution currently, does that mean I'm not being a faithful Christian?*

HOW CAN I BE FAITHFUL UNDER PERSECUTION?

How do I respond?

1. Rejoice

- **Knowing your reward is great**

What we've been given: the earth (Matt. 5:5—blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth); the kingdom (Lk. 12:31-32, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom).

If we've been given this, why would we be stingy or try to make a name for ourselves? It's already ours.

We were dead in our sin, now made alive (Eph. 2:1). *Remembering that is humbling (2:11).*

- **Knowing its result**

1 Peter 1:6-7

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Notice the reason why Peter says trials have come? To prove the genuineness of your faith, that it may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

- **Knowing we serve an unchanging God**

There are times when we can't see or understand the reason why God allows a specific instance of suffering.

But one thing we do know – one thing that never changes – is the character of the God who is sovereign over all things, including our suffering. There is no clearer place to look to see the heart of God than the cross – it's there we gain the assurance of who He is and why we can be sure we can trust Him.

Listen to Romans 8:31-32 *“What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”*

2. Hope

a) Hope in the gospel.

As a Christian, our hope is not in the same things that the world hopes in. Our hope is that a Holy God has made a way for His appropriate and infinite wrath for our sin to be poured out on Christ. So that we

no longer stand under a sentence of Hell, but now face an eternity of enjoyment of God. That is the gospel.

As a Christian one of the best ways we can prepare for suffering and difficulty in the pursuit of missions is to **deliberately contrast our hardships against the immeasurable value of the gospel message.**

People who don't have hope in Christ often find suffering intolerable because it robs them of their only hope...pleasure and satisfaction in this life. But as Christians, we have a different hope. It is rooted in the joy of knowing that we will see and enjoy the glory of Christ.

b) Consider whether you're making that hope visible (1 Peter 3:13-16)

So if we are not like those who hope only in this world, if we genuinely value the worth of the Gospel above all things, is that visible to others? If other people were to look at our lives, would it be clear to them that we hope in something different than they do? Or would they just think that our Christianity was a tool we use to help us get all the same things that they want...comfort, success, safety, money, and approval from others?

What about considering going overseas? Has the possibility of suffering—whether it is the loss of your own comfort, that of your spouse, or that of children—precluded you from going? Let's be clear about why we are not overseas. If it is only because we are afraid to lose the things of this world, that is a bad reason.

Whether you'd like to pursue missions or not, is your lifestyle so different than the people around you that it elicits questions about what YOU hope in, since you clearly don't hope in the same things they do?

3. Count the cost

Suffering will happen no matter where you live. Certainly, serving overseas will cost you in a different way. If you are thinking of going overseas, it is good to be clear on what such costs might be. And if you are married and thinking of going, it would be helpful to think through together with your spouse exactly how such costs might look. We should count the cost, just like Jesus says we should do in all areas of our discipleship (Luke 14:27-30, 33).

Suffering might take different forms, particularly for us Westerners living in the 21st century. This might not be death, like Stephen or Paul faced. People who are Westerners will probably not be threatened on a physical level; by God's providence, usually the worst thing that can happen is expulsion.

Generally, the suffering that missionaries face is on a more mundane level: it happens day after day after day.

Often, though, the issues relate not just to one's self but to others instead. What if going to an unreached place meant seeing your family go through uncomfortable situations? Problems with children are one of the top reasons missionaries end up leaving the field. They may have difficulty acculturating or, on the other hand, acculturate so well that when they get back to the US, they seem displaced. Or children's education may be an issue. On the other end, dealing with aging parents pose similar issues to those on the field.

Now, it isn't necessary that all these situations should happen. But it is good to have awareness and consider the types of suffering that might occur. Ultimately, this shouldn't make us despondent or scared. Instead, we should be cultivating a spirit of trust in God and of thankfulness for His grace.

4. Cultivate thankfulness, not entitlement

Therefore, everything we have comes from God, by His grace through Christ. We're not entitled to any of it – it's all God's and He can take it all away. Missionaries face suffering in many ways—from culture shock to substandard housing to opposition from the government and locals. Troubles will come. Suffering will come. But we can learn to grow in thankfulness for the opportunity to spend our lives for His glory in this way.

He has not given us gifts because we deserve them or because He owes us. Therefore, we cannot hold onto anything. We have to be willing to let go, for His sake.

Questions?

CONCLUSION

We began by thinking about why we would consider this in the missions class. And we highlighted the work of A. Judson, who certainly suffered a lot through his missionary work.

But in God's providence, he actually became a believer through tragedy:

- Pastor's kid in Mass.; while in college at what's now Brown, became friends with a deist and skeptic.
- Led him away from the faith
- His friend fell ill – he heard him dying.
- Through that experience, and shock, he became a Christian—and a passionate one!
- Founded the first missions society in the US, set sail for Burma four years after the death of his friend.

PRAY