

Suffering Is Universal

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[0 : 00] there, but as you are turning, let me just mention I want to start tonight a series on suffering. And we will be looking at this topic next Lord's Day evening, if the Lord willing, but also on other times when I have the occasion to preach for the next several times I'll look at this topic with you.

Because you cannot read the Bible and conclude that Christians will not experience suffering. In fact, the testimony of the Bible is that we will experience suffering. The scriptures remind us man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.

I think it's in Job, it says man's days are few and those days are full of trouble. Jesus reminds us the servant is not greater than the master, that if the master suffered persecution, we should expect persecution.

Another place, Jesus reminds us that we will weep and mourn, but our mourning will be turned to joy. So the Bible is not in denial about the problem of suffering.

Our master assures us that in this world we're going to have trouble, we're going to have tribulation, but we can take heart because he has overcome the world. And the apostle Paul speaks so often of his sufferings.

[1 : 17] He says in 1 Corinthians chapter 4, to this very hour we grow hungry. We are hungry and thirsty. We are in rags. We are brutally treated.

We are homeless. We work hard with our hands. When we are cursed, we bless. When we are persecuted, we endure it. When we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this very moment, we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.

He speaks of the hardships that they suffered in Asia in 2 Corinthians 1, how they despaired of death or of life, and they thought they were beyond their ability to endure suffering.

So that theme of suffering is one that we find throughout the scripture, and it was very striking to me as I was preparing these messages. I read through the New Testament very quickly just looking for suffering found in every book in the New Testament and in several chapters in many books, the theme of suffering again and again.

Let me read these verses to you from Romans chapter 8, beginning with verse 18, reading through verse 23. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

[2 : 33] The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from the bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time, and not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, inwardly groan as we eagerly await our adoption as sons to the redemption of our bodies.

For in this we have hope, excuse me, for in this hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is no hope at all for who hopes for what he already has. But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

Let me pray and ask God to be with us as we look at this passage. We are mindful of the fact that it's the entrance of your word that gives light, and so we pray for that light.

We pray for illumination. We pray for understanding. We pray for insight into your scriptures so that we might grow in grace, so that we might have a context in which to place the sufferings that we experience, so we might respond to suffering in ways that are biblical, in ways that find hope in God and in God's grace.

[4 : 04] So we pray, Lord, that you would school us tonight in this great topic that is one of the longitudinal themes of your word that we will in this world face suffering.

We pray that you would teach us and show us our hope that is found in Christ. We ask this for his glory. Amen. Well, this evening I want to just establish this truth that suffering is a universal experience of all Christians, and Paul assumes that in this passage.

He says, I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing. He could have written, if you suffer, should you be one of these Christians who suffer, then here are some perspectives you can have on suffering.

But he doesn't do that. He simply writes of our present sufferings. He assumes that suffering is the universal experience of every Christian.

And it's true that suffering and affliction intrude into the lives of every Christian. So he doesn't write as though that may not be the case, but he writes as though it is a certainty that suffering and affliction will come to the life of every Christian.

[5 : 17] I consider our present sufferings are not worth comparing. Sufferings are going to be the lot of every believer. In fact, this passage that I just read to you is full of metaphors about suffering.

He speaks of the creation. The creation has been subjected to frustration. Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch theologian, argued that the creation as we know it, as we experience it, is abnormal.

Normal. Because it's a creation that has been subjected to frustration. Normal would be the creation before the fall, before the effects of the fall on the creation.

But the effects of the fall have so thoroughly impacted the world that even the creation itself is groaning in frustration. The creation itself doesn't work the way it ought to work.

In verse 21, we have another metaphor of suffering. It says the created order is in bondage to decay. And the decay we see everywhere around us is an evidence of suffering.

[6 : 23] If you look around you, you see decay. Things lose their beauty. Things corrode. They rust. The paint fades. The cracks appear. Things that were once strong become weak and wobbly.

Fresh things become stale. Beautiful things grow old and ugly. Gravity has its way with our faces. We see change and decay all around us.

And we live in a world in which we cannot escape the reality of decay and the suffering that decay brings. We see it in the mirror every day.

Another vivid metaphor for suffering in this passage is childbirth. The whole creation groans like the groaning of childbirth. And the pain and travail of childbirth is something that is universally relatable.

For all of us. Because we've all heard of the suffering of childbirth. We've either experienced or have observed or have heard of the travail of bringing a child into the world.

[7 : 28] It's very interesting. If you think about this passage, it struck me that you hear the echoes of Genesis chapter 3 in this passage. All the elements of the curse are here.

The ground is cursed. It's through toil and hardship that we bring forth food. Futility and decay are everywhere. It's through pain that women will bear children.

And Paul is selective in the metaphors that he uses here to describe suffering. Because he uses metaphors in this passage that are relatable for all of us.

If he spoke just of suffering and disease, we are not all experiencing suffering and disease. We don't all experience the kind of betrayal that Hosea experienced with his wife Gomer.

We don't all experience natural disaster and calamity. We don't all experience times when the heavens seem like brass and our prayers seem to bounce off the ceilings.

[8 : 26] But Paul uses these broad, inescapable metaphors for suffering that are part of the universal experience of all mankind. Because we can all relate to a creation that doesn't function the way it ought to function.

We can relate to the universal experience of mothers bringing children into the world through groaning and travail. So the theological assumption of this passage is that suffering is the experience of every Christian.

As I was studying and preparing to speak on this topic of suffering, I started looking for categories of suffering in the Scripture. And I discovered ten broad categories of suffering that are described for us in the Scripture.

And I want to go through those with you very quickly, just to remind us of the various types of suffering that Christians experience, that people experience in this fallen world. The suffering of the loss of fortune.

Remember in the book of Job, how that in a single day, Job lost his fortune. The Sabaeans and the Chaldeans came down upon his flocks, and they raided his flocks and carried them off.

[9 : 33] Fire fell from heaven, consuming his servants and his sheep. And in a moment, this man who had been the wealthiest man in the East lost his entire fortune.

Physical or loss of fortune. Physical suffering, the second category. Remember, after Job had lost his cattle and his wealth, Satan came to God and he said, Skin for skin, stretch out your hand, touch his flesh and his bones, and he'll curse you to his face.

And so you know the story. God gave leave to the devil, and Job was subjected with intense physical sufferings. He had open wounds from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet.

Think of the beggar, Lazarus, in Luke chapter 16, who was afflicted with boils and who found soothing comfort from the dogs that would come and lick his wounds.

Even the great apostle suffered some sort of physical, what people many think was a physical suffering, describes a thorn in the flesh, of course, in 2 Corinthians chapter 12.

[10 : 40] And some of you here tonight are experiencing physical suffering. I was reading recently a book by Dave Furman, who's a church planter and missionary in the Middle East, and he describes working as a church planter in the middle of affliction, of nerve damage to his arms and his limbs that have made him so weak he can't even carry the groceries in.

When they go to the store, his wife has to carry them. And in addition to that, he has boils and sores all over his hands and even to the tips of his fingers. Physical suffering.

The third category is political suffering, suffering that comes at the hand of the state. Remember in Acts chapter 12, Herod had James, the brother of John, put to death.

And he saw that it pleased the Jews. And when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he seized Peter and had Peter put in prison. And some, like the apostle Peter, face imprisonment for their faith.

Remember last year, Andrew Brunson was released from prison after two years of imprisonment in Turkey for the gospel. And in that time, he lost 50 pounds and lived each day in fear of being attacked by Islamists in the prison and also dreading a show trial in which his guilt was a foregone conclusion.

[12 : 03] And thankfully, through the intervention of the secretary of state and the president, he was released last year from imprisonment, political imprisonment. Another fourth category is persecution for the faith.

Because some of the most intense forms of persecution don't come from the state. They come from others. Remember how Paul writes to Timothy about his suffering in Antioch and Iconium and Lystra.

And he makes this statement, everyone who lives a godly life in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. The persecution is going to be the universal experience of all of us.

If we want to live for God in a world that is given over to the evil one, you will suffer persecution. Jesus talks about that, doesn't he? He says, if you belong to the world, it would love you as its own.

But as it is, you don't belong to the world. I've chosen you out of the world. That's why the world hates you. The fifth area of suffering is suffering at the hands of enemies.

[13 : 11] Sometimes we face implacable foes, people who hate us. It's not just religious persecution. There are people that hate us. And the psalmist is full of laments about enemies.

In Psalm 56, and if you want to turn there, you could and just look over this as I just referenced some verses. But it's very descriptive. Psalm 56 says, men are in hot pursuit of him.

All day long they press their attack. Verse 2, he says he's slandered by proud men. Verse 3, he says his words are twisted. Enemies are plotting against him.

In verse 6, he says they conspire. They watch my steps, eager to take my life. In chapter 57, he describes men who are like lions, like ravenous beasts, whose teeth are like spears and tongues are like sharp swords.

Have you ever experienced such things? Many of us have experienced those things. People who will twist your words, who plot against you, who are like lions ready to pounce.

[14 : 22] And suffering from the hand of enemies is a great travail and suffering. But sometimes the suffering is even betrayal by a trusted friend.

That's the sixth category. David describes betrayal by a friend so vividly in Psalm 55. He says, If an enemy were attacking me, I could endure it.

If a foe were lifting up his hand against me, I could hide from him. But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend, one with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the house of God.

Some of you have experienced that kind of suffering, the suffering of betrayal by a close friend. And you might expect the attack of an enemy. An enemy makes no secret of his hatred.

David says, I could endure this if it was from an enemy. I could hide. I could try to protect myself. But I'm open. I'm vulnerable before my friend. And you can't miss in this passage the way that the suffering is intensified by the fact it is a friend.

[15 : 32] And this is you, my companion, one with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng to the house of God. It's one with whom I've worshipped and praised God.

Some of you have experienced that kind of betrayal. People will use sweet words, but their dagger is to pierce your heart. David describes it that way.

In this psalm, he says, their speech is smooth as butter, but there's war in their hearts. Their words are soothing as oil, but they're drawn swords. And the fact that it is a companion makes it all the more painful because the closer the relationship, the greater the pain of betrayal.

The seventh category is family suffering. Perhaps suffering at the hands of an enemy or even the hands of a friend is painful, but what suffering is greater than the suffering that comes in family relationships?

Because sometimes in the most basic human relationships, husband, wife, marriage, parent, child, brother, sister, there's those basic human relationships.

[16 : 47] It ought to be such sources of joy become sources of strife and contention and sorrow. Think of the agony that's displayed in the book of Hosea with Hosea's wife, Gomer.

And he goes out in search of her, and he finds her. She's being auctioned off, sold into slavery, and he buys her back for a few ounces of silver and 300 liters of grain.

And imagine the strange mixture of emotions as he takes her home again, cleans her up, has to deal with the gossip and the intrusive curiosity of nosy neighbors.

Or think of the agony in the heart of a parent who sees his child rebelling. He sees the child going bad, and you see it happening, but you can't stop it.

You're helpless to stop it. You can't keep them from hardening their hearts and plunging themselves into destruction and sinful patterns of behavior. Such a poignant story in 2 Samuel chapter 18.

[17 : 53] Of course, you remember the story of Absalom who fomented rebellion against his father, King David. And the herald comes to David reporting on the battle, and he reports a good report.

We've been victorious. The enemy has been, the rebellion has been crushed, but all David can think about is his son. And he says to the herald, is the young man Absalom safe?

And the poignancy of his grief is something every parent of a child who's stumbled can relate to. He cries out, Oh, Absalom, my son, my son.

If only I had died instead of you, Absalom, my son. Some of us have experienced that kind of grief of children whose choices have been bad choices, and they've made shipwreck of their lives.

Another category, eighth category, is spiritual oppression. Sometimes we experience the affliction the psalmist describes in Psalm 88. Psalm 88 is the only psalm that doesn't end in resolution.

[19 : 03] But the psalmist in verses 1 through 3, he says, I cry out to God day and night. My soul is full of trouble. In verses 3 and 4, I've lost all my strength. I'm exhausted.

I feel like dying. Verses 6 and 7, he says, I'm in the lowest pit. Your waves are crashing over me. Verse 8, he says, I've lost my dearest friends. I'm repulsive to them.

Verses 9 through 14, he says, I call out to you day and night, and yet you reject me.

Verses 15 and 17, he says, Terror and despair have swept over me like a flood, and the psalm ends without resolution. Darkness is my closest friend.

And no doubt there are some of us here tonight who have faced those times when the heavens seem like brass, when we felt like we couldn't get a hold of God, when we felt full of deep depression and despair, like we've lost everything of value, and there's no reason to go on.

[20 : 06] You can't find God. There's no hope. C.S. Lewis, in his book about the loss of his wife, entitled, A Grief Observed, he says this.

He says, But you go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? The door slammed in your face, the sound of bolting and double bolting inside, and after that, silence.

And you may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. That kind of spiritual oppression is sometimes the experience of Christians.

The ninth category is circumstantial suffering. The Apostle Paul describes that in so many places. In 2 Corinthians 1, he says, I want you to know the affliction we experienced in Asia.

We were utterly burdened beyond our capacity to bear, so we despaired even of life. Indeed, we felt like we had received the sentence of death. In 2 Corinthians 6, he describes hardship and calamity and beatings and imprisonment and riots and sleepless nights, hunger, times when he was dishonored and slandered and treated like an imposter of the obscurity, feeling like he was dying full of sorrow, full of poverty.

[21 : 30] In 2 Corinthians 11, he describes his imprisonment repeatedly being in danger of death.

Remarkably, he says, he was flogged five times. Roman flogging was a vicious torture, and the scourge would tear into the subcutaneous layers of skin on the back, often exposing the ribs on the back of a person.

Sometimes an artery would be severed, and the person would just bleed out and die instantly. Many people died as a result of a single flogging, and yet the Apostle Paul endured flogging five times.

I've often thought his back must have been just a mass of scar tissue from being flogged again and again. And in addition to flogging, he was beaten with rods. He was stoned and left for dead on three occasions.

He spent a day and a night in the open seas. He experienced danger from rivers, dangerous from bandits, dangerous from Jews, dangerous from Gentiles, dangerous from false brothers, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, poverty, nakedness, exposure to the elements.

[22 : 45] I mean, intense physical suffering. And then the tenth category that I was able to discern in the Scripture was the suffering of chastisement. Think of Jonah running from God in disobedience, thrown into the raging sea, swallowed by a great fish, vomited out on the shore as a changed man and made submissive to his father's will by this intense chastisement.

Some of us have faced that kind of chastisement from God. But if we were going to summarize, we could say the suffering is the universal experience of every Christian. There are no precautions you can take to avoid it.

You can work hard to construct a safe and pleasing life. You can plan your career. You can do careful financial planning.

You can eat the right foods. You can maintain a regimen of exercise to maintain good health. You can cultivate nurturing relationships with your friends and your family.

You can work to nurture your children. But something outside your control will intrude into your plans. And what Romans 8.18 is teaching us is that suffering is something we will all face.

[24 : 04] I've identified various categories. And for the purpose of discussion, we can look at these 10 different categories of suffering. But in our lives, suffering is not compartmentalized that easily.

In fact, often suffering overlays suffering. So financial suffering due to unemployment can quickly bleed over into emotional distress or marital conflict or even health problems.

The sufferings can impact our children. They can distract us from our primary calling to shepherd them. And these broad categories of suffering can blend together in a perfect storm of affliction.

And many of us have experienced that. We've experienced suffering, overlaid on suffering at the very same moment. And in our text, Paul identifies the ways that we suffer.

But he also puts our suffering on a balanced scale. And he says something to us that's very encouraging. He says, Our present suffering cannot be compared with the glory that will be revealed in us.

[25 : 14] Sometimes I think we read this passage wrongly and we think of the glory that will be revealed to us. We think of the grand and glorious day when Christ comes with his holy angels and we see a revelation of the glory of God and we see Christ exalted to the highest place and given a name above every name and everyone bowing and acknowledging the lordship of Christ to the glory of the Father.

What a day that will be. How grand, how glorious, how wonderful that will be. But that's not what's being described in this passage. It's not describing the glory that will be revealed to us.

It's the glory that will be revealed in us. If we think about this, we were once beautiful. We were, think of Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve in the glory of the garden.

Adam and Eve, the glory of the creation that God had made. They excelled the rest of the creation in every way. And mankind was beautiful and glorious above all the other creatures.

The only one who was made in the image of God and possessing a nobility that transcended all the other created order and even transcends our ability to fathom and conceptualize.

[26 : 40] He lived in complete fellowship and communion with God. And of course, sin brought death and brought a loss of glory.

But once we had, we were part of this glory at one time. We were human beings. We were these glorious creatures. And that's why we long for glory so much.

And the end of God's saving grace in our hearts is not only the forgiveness of our sins and the giving of us righteousness and the ending of all the problems of evil and suffering that sin has brought upon mankind.

The end of God's saving purpose is His glory revealed in us. We will experience something greater than just the restoration of the glory that Adam and Eve lost.

I mean, if that's all we received, it would be grand. But we're to have an enjoyment of God and a participation in God that surpasses Adam's experience.

[27 : 50] We could think about it this way. Adam was perfect. He was in a state of innocence. But that state of innocence falls short of the glory that will be revealed in us.

Because Adam would have received glorification as a reward if he had perfectly obeyed God's law. And it's that reward, it's that glory that will be revealed in us.

So the glory to be revealed in us is greater than the glory that Adam and Eve experienced in the garden. And it's the splendor of the glory of God that we delight in and we see, we catch glimpses of from afar.

But that experience of the glory of God will be experienced in union with Him and experienced in us. So Paul's comparing future glory that is to be experienced by the people of God with our present sufferings.

And he's saying, if you put them on a scale, our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. And that's obvious, isn't it?

[28 : 58] Because if the glory that we enjoy is greater even than the glory that Adam enjoyed in the garden before the fall, if it's the glory of the consummation of obedience and complete fellowship with God from which we cannot fall, that glory will certainly outstrip our present suffering.

And Paul uses a word here, a word picture. He says, it's translated, it's not worth comparing. It's a word picture that describes the way that a weight drives a balanced scale down.

And the idea is that future glory to be revealed in us is so weighty that our present sufferings are like feathers compared with the weight of glory that will be revealed in us.

It's very similar in many ways to 2 Corinthians chapter 4 where Paul says, our light and momentary troubles are achieving in us an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs them all.

How is that? How does it far outweigh the present suffering? I want to give you three ways. It outweighs it in its intensity. Because the comparison between the intensity of our suffering and the intensity of the glory that will be revealed in us.

[30 : 22] And it's just comparing that Paul is doing in this passage. Our suffering is heavy. And when you suffer, the weight of your suffering is heavy, sometimes feels overwhelming.

But it's nothing compared to the glory that will be revealed in us. Suffering, it hurts. It can overwhelm. We groan. Sometimes we even scream under the weight of our suffering.

But Paul, a man acquainted with suffering, says the weight of our present suffering are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. It's like the weight of feathers compared to the weight of lead.

Our present sufferings are unbearable. Sometimes they seem like they will crush us beneath our weight. But the intensity of the glory of God that will be revealed in us is not worth comparing to our present experience of suffering.

Another way is the, so it's not worth comparing in terms of intensity. It's not worth comparing in terms of location. The glory will be revealed in us, in our very being.

[31 : 31] And that difference is seen in the parallel passage in 2 Corinthians chapter 4. Or outwardly, we're wasting away. Inwardly, we're being renewed day by day. The sufferings we experience in this life affect us outwardly.

They have to do with the circumstances and conditions that we experience in this present life. But the real me, the inner me, who's going to participate in His glory, we are not just going to observe the glory of the triune God, but we will experience it.

God will one day give us the morning star and cause, put within us the splendor of the sun. As verse 17 says, we will, just as we share in His suffering, we will also share in His glory.

His glory will not be just revealed to us. It will be revealed in us. We will share in His glory. It's an amazing thing to think about. And third comparison is the duration.

The sufferings we experience in this life are for a moment of time. But the glory will be revealed in us is eternal. And again, 2 Corinthians 4 provides such a wonderful commentary.

[32 : 45] Our troubles are light and momentary. The glory is eternal. And so our eyes are riveted not to this seen world with its passing moments of suffering, but to the unseen world and the eternal glory that will be revealed in us in Christ.

So where does that leave us? We've got to face suffering with a long view. Responding to suffering requires a long perspective. Paul says our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

Any moment of suffering cannot be understood in terms of this life. Can I repeat that? Any moment of suffering cannot be understood.

It cannot be properly interpreted in terms of this life. If you try to interpret it in terms of this life, you're going to get lost in the suffering. The suffering is going to be overwhelming and unbearable.

Without a vision for eternity, for future glory to be revealed in us, we cannot evaluate the suffering of this present life. So the passage is reminding us that we face these present sufferings, but there is this future glory.

[34 : 07] And the assertion of the passage is that our present sufferings pale in comparison to the future glory. You see, our concept of time is flawed. We think in terms of our lives on this planet, forgetting the fact that we are immortal creatures.

forgetting that days and months and even years of present suffering are going to give way to eternal pleasures that will be found at the right hand of God.

We've got to have that long view. And of course, our means of evaluation is flawed because we're corporal creatures. We live in bodies. We experience and evaluate life through our five senses.

and we experience our suffering through our senses. We feel the pain. We hear the accusations. We experience the betrayal. We suffer financial loss.

We watch our children make bad choices. Our minds replay the disappointments and the discouragements of our days. It's hard for us to step out of this sense-oriented point of view and make a spiritual evaluation of the grace of God that is being worked in us through the trials that fill our senses and seem so overwhelming.

[35 : 26] We've got to be reminded that our trials cannot be evaluated in terms of our five senses. So, we're called to stand firm.

I was interested Carl brought us there at the end of his leading this worship. Suppose this life is all that there was. Suppose there was no glory. Suppose there was no glory to be revealed in us that whatever we experienced in this life when it came to an end it was the end.

If that was the case I cannot imagine suffering anything that I could possibly avoid. But knowing that there's an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs the suffering of this present life enables us to stand firm.

That's what Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 he says therefore brothers stand firm let nothing move you always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

This is how our Savior suffered. He was the only truly innocent sufferer. What sustained him in his suffering and in his affliction?

[36 : 39] It was what Carl reminded us of a few minutes ago was the joy that was set before him. He looked beyond the cross beyond its suffering and shame to joy to the presence of the Father to the company of the redeemed and for joy the joy set before him he endured suffering.

May we follow in his steps. Let's pray together. Father we ask that you would help us to be like Christ and to endure suffering for the joy set before us that we would be in the midst of our suffering thinking not just of our pain and travail and anguish of spirit and fears but we pray Lord that in the midst of our suffering we would be thinking of the eternal weight of glory that far outweighs our suffering.

Comfort us with this truth tonight Lord that the present suffering we experience the brokenness of life in a broken world with our own flaws and sins and failures and the flaws and sins and failures of those around us is not all that there is.

even the physical suffering we endure the ways that the world the created order has been subjected to frustration and works against us that all of this is not all there is but it's that as poignant as it is and as much as it afflicts us and captures our attention and our imagination and fills us with fear and dread it's not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us.

So we pray Lord that for joy anticipating that glory we would endure suffering. We ask this for Christ's sake. Amen.