

The Grad Experience

Week 6



Suffering: Experiencing It and Seeing It in the World

Key Lesson: When we suffer, we long for someone who understands and is able to comfort us. For the Christian, that is exactly what we have in Jesus. He is the “man of sorrows, acquainted with grief,” and he has promised to never leave us, to never forsake us, and we are assured that nothing can separate us from his love.

Welcome to Week 6 of the Grad Experience. **Each week as we look at specific topics that are extremely present in your world today. Our goal is for you to spend some time discussing in a safe place so you ask questions and develop a stronger viewpoint on each of them.** Even if they are not present in your high school right now, they will eventually be present on a college campus, workforce, or military ... or just in the general culture of the world you live in.

Our goal isn't for you to leave here each week with a definitive answer to some of life's tough questions when it comes to living life after high school, but to get you at least **thinking about the topic and determining how that connects with whatever faith you claim to have.**

Last week we talked about religion and what makes Christianity uniquely different. That all roads don't lead to the same God.

This week we are going to look at the age-old question of suffering. Why would a loving God allow good people to suffer?

I want to show you a quick video to get you thinking about this subject:

WATCH VIDEO – 3 min

After watching this video, what's the most interesting thing you heard or question that came up?

So let's just ask the big question:

**What kind of loving God would allow bad things to happen to people?
If God loves us, then why would he allow someone to feel so bad?**

First – **this may be the atheist's most common objection to the existence of God** – or at least an all-powerful, loving God.

It's natural to struggle with the concept of the reality of God along with suffering and pain.

- We see it daily.
- We witness the effects of disease, famine, natural disaster.
- We see war & man-made disasters.
- We see poverty.
- And we may even experience loss, persecution, rejection, depression, loneliness, and relational brokenness in our own lives.
 - This can all cause us to cry out, “Where are you God? Are you even in control? If you are, don't you care for us?”

POSSIBLE VIDEO: PRAGER U ON SUFFERING

There're two challenges with suffering we need to look at:

1. **The emotional level**
2. **The rational level**

Emotional level – On an emotional it is virtually impossible to solve. Suffering will never **not be** painful – regardless of its source or cause.

“There is no answer that can be given that will satisfy the emotional pain of suffering. - Theologian James Emory White

What are your thoughts about this statement?

On an emotional level, all you can really do is walk alongside those who suffer, loving them, praying for them, and hurting for them.

The Bible tells us to *Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.* – Romans 12:15

Rational level – Do you think it is rational to assume that the reality of a loving, sovereign God is incompatible with evil and suffering being present in the world?

Most philosophers will argue that it is possible for these two to coexist.

- **The existence of evil does not negate the existence of God; nor does the existence of God negate the existence of evil.**
 - **What are your thoughts about this statement?**

Why aren't these two statements logically incompatible?

- **Because an all-powerful, loving God could have morally sufficient reasons for allowing evil that human beings are not privy to--that we cannot understand.**
- As humans, we are not in a position to judge God's reasons, or to see his view (which is much longer and all-encompassing than our own).

Think about it this way:

- In order to achieve his ends, God may, in fact, have to put up with certain evils along the way. (Scripture is full of stories that demonstrate this, from the persecution of God's chosen people by other nations, the lives of Joseph and Job, and to the unjust condemnation and crucifixion of his own Son!)

What about another rational question: Is God's chief purpose for us to live life happy? Why or why not?

“From a biblical perspective, we must also reject the idea that if God loves us, he cannot intend for us to suffer. God's beloved Son, the One in whom the Father is well pleased, comes expressly to suffer and to die out of love for his people. People often think that the reality of suffering is an embarrassment to the Christian faith. But I think suffering is the greatest apologetic for Christianity there is.” – *Confronting Christianity*, Rebecca McLaughlin

Agree or disagree? Why?

If you take just a brief overview of the bible, you will see that **suffering is a key theme in life.**

The central character of all of the scriptures (Jesus) is even called a “man of sorrows.”

He was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care. – Isaiah 53:3

BUT ... the bible also demonstrates that **God can use suffering to change, refine, prepare, purify, sanctify and beautify us.**

*And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself **restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish** you. - 1 Peter 5:10*

- So as hard as it may be for our modern minds to grasp – **rationally speaking – suffering and evil are not incompatible with the existence of a loving, sovereign God.**

Now let's move to choices when it comes to suffering.

What role does free will or human choice play in suffering? (you saw free will talked about in the video)

This is a key question! In the beginning, God created a world in which there was no evil or suffering. **Suffering entered the human experience when Adam and Eve sinned.** (Gen. 3:16-24)

- God could have made Adam/Eve robots, but He didn't.
- He made them to be free moral agents, able to choose for themselves whether to love and obey God – which as a result – made them vulnerable to their own choices.

Without free will you don't have the capacity to love.

- With free will you have the capacity to love.
- But also with free will, you have the capacity to suffer.
- Coerced love is not freely given.
- **Love can only be love if there is a real choice to be involved in its exchange.**

We are made free to love Him or not and from the beginning men have chosen to reject God's love and break God's laws and therefore experience suffering.

Suffering can be the direct consequence of our own sin.

- Adultery – broken marriage
- Steals – convicted of theft/prison
- Abuse alcohol/drugs – addiction

But **not all suffering is the direct consequence of a person's specific sin.**

- Think of the blind man that **Jesus healed with mud pies**. The reason for his suffering was so that God might be glorified.
- When you stop and think about that – that's really a hard thing to swallow.

We see in the bible examples of **developing patience with injustice:**

***19** For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering **unjustly.** **20** For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when*

you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. – 1 Peter 2:19 -20

And even **suffering because of godliness:**

Of course, you get no credit for being patient if you are beaten for doing wrong. But if you suffer for doing good and endure it patiently, God is pleased with you. – 1 Peter 2:20

Even though sin and suffering are connected – the AMOUNT of suffering someone has to endure **is not always proportional** to his/her sin.

The simple existence of sin makes everything not as it should be.

All creation has been affected by the sin of humans in this fallen world.

If there were no sin at all – there would be no suffering – but because all are free to choose, all are susceptible to sin. And because all are susceptible to sin, all are susceptible to suffering. What do you think about this statement?

What about mental suffering? (anxiety, depression, illness, panic attacks) Where does that fall on the suffering scale along with God's love?

First – it's not a punishment, it's just another way we may have to suffer in this life on this broken world.

The best comfort I know is that the Bible specifically states that God is close to those who are suffering:

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed. – Psalm 34:18

And **this suffering is still a cause of sin breaking the world** – it's not God's desire to hurt you:

³¹ For no one is abandoned by the Lord forever. ³² Though he brings grief, he also shows compassion because of the greatness of his unfailing love. ³³ For he does not enjoy hurting people or causing them sorrow. – Lamentations 3:31-33

Let's look at another cause of suffering.

What about natural disease and disasters? Are these indirect consequences of sin at the moment of the fall?

Read Romans 8:18-21

¹⁸ Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later. ¹⁹ For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. ²⁰ Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse. But with eager hope, ²¹ the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. – Romans 8:18-21

Natural decay/disaster is all a result of the disorder in creation as a result of original sin.

Although disasters like these are sometimes referred to as "acts of God," it is wrong to say that God ordains every flood or fire or famine, or that He does so in retribution for some particular sin.

- God certainly did so once--He sent the flood in judgment during the days of Noah--**but afterward He promised never to do so again.**

The thread of potential destruction is now woven into the fabric of creation as a result of the fall. But it won't always be that way. God's plan for creation is not punitive, but redemptive. **(see Rom. 8:20-21 earlier)**

We are a part of creation, so **we are subject to sin, disaster, and decay.** Things go wrong both in us and around us.

Righteous & unrighteous people are affected by the results of sin.

- Although God can protect his people from the evils that could come their way, He gives *no guarantee that He will always do so.*

But one day there will be a new heaven and earth. **(see Revelation 21:1-5)**

Do we have any responsibility in suffering? Can our response to it change anything?

When we're suffering, we often ask "Why?" But we won't always be able to answer that question.

Job: God never told Job the reason for his suffering, but He assured Job He was in control, and that there was purpose in his trials. When Job challenged God, God pointed out how little Job really understood about the workings of the universe and asked him simply to trust God's wisdom. The book of Job is not so much about why God allows suffering, but about how we should respond to it.

When we suffer – maybe we ask, "What might God be saying to me through this experience?"

- **Could there be something for me to learn here? Maybe it's how to be more compassionate to others who suffer.**
 - Maybe it's how to more fully lean on God in times of weakness.
- **Could there be something God is calling me to do in response to the suffering I am experiencing or witnessing?**

Our response to suffering can change others, change ourselves, and change the world. Suffering can be a catalyst to greater growth, greater faith, and greater good.

What are your thoughts about this statement? Agree or disagree? Why?

Share quote:

"How does God accomplish this purpose [of maturing us]? Not by shielding us from assault by the world, the flesh and the devil, nor by protecting us from burdensome and frustrating circumstances...but rather by exposing us to all these things, so as to overwhelm us with a sense of our own inadequacy, he drives us to cling to him more closely." – Theologian J.I. Packer. What thoughts come to mind when you read this?

Have someone read Romans 5:3-5:

*³We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, **for we know that they help us develop endurance.** ⁴And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our **confident hope of salvation.** ⁵And this hope will not lead to disappointment.*

For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love. – Romans 5:3-5

TRUTH: We do not have to call suffering good to believe that God is able to bring good from it. THOUGHTS?

How is Jesus uniquely able to understand our suffering, and accompany us through it?

- Christianity offers us something no other world religion does: **A God who understands suffering because He experienced it. In Jesus, God embodied human suffering; there is nothing about it he does not understand.** When it comes to human suffering, *Jesus gets it.*
 - He was persecuted by religious authorities.
 - Abandoned by friends.
 - Misunderstood, even by members of his own family.
 - Bereaved by loss.
 - He was hunted, arrested, falsely accused and executed as a common criminal.

Share quote:

But when I look at the cross, I see a God so intent on loving and living with his people that he was willing to crawl into the deepest pit of suffering known to humanity so all of humanity might know there is no darkness into which He will not give chase. – Ryan Casey Waller

How does this statement make you feel about suffering? About God?

Jesus denied himself the privileges that were his as God to fully embrace what it means to be human--**and not just the best parts of humanity.**

Share quote:

The Son of God suffered unto death, not that men might not suffer, but that their sufferings might be like His. – George McDonald, *Unspoken Sermons, First Series*

The overall point is that **we may never eradicate suffering in this broken life** (until Jesus someday makes us new) **but to overcome suffering by faithfully enduring it and doing our part to allow our story to help others cope in their suffering.**

Remember this: When we suffer, we long for someone who understands and is able to comfort us. For the Christian, that is exactly what we have in Jesus. He is the “man of sorrows, acquainted with grief,” and he has promised to never leave us, to never forsake us, and we are assured that nothing can separate us from his love.

QR Code for the church Darkroom website

Close with prayer