

REJOICING IN OUR SUFFERING

CLASS 4: KNOWING THAT GOD IS WITH US IN OUR SUFFERING

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

- Suffering is a very normal part of the Christian life.
- It can be hard to comprehend how there is suffering when God, who is good, is sovereign over everything in the world.
- In other words, *how can a good God allow such atrocities to take place right before His face?*
- It has caused many to wonder where or if God is present in the midst of their hardships.
- Combined with a lack of biblical understanding and the church's failure to teach the whole counsel of God's Word, many Christians are left trying to piece together what is going on their life.
- When we are left to our own emotions and experiences to lead, believers often times find themselves staying in the pit of despair or even worse, turning away from the God who loves them.
- Our goal in this class is to develop a proper biblical view of suffering.
- While we will most likely never know why *all* of our suffering is taking place, we can know who God is and what He desires to accomplish through our hardships.
- When we have a biblical understanding of who God is and how He works in His creation, we are then better equipped to not only direct our own hearts but the hearts of those who are suffering around us.
- The Christian should be the most joyous in the world, a beacon of hope to those who are searching and to those who are walking down the same path with them.
- **Here is the schedule for the upcoming lessons:**
 - April 27th: Introduction/A Biblical View of Suffering
 - May 4th: Suffering and the Sovereignty of God
 - May 11th: The Purposes for Suffering
 - **May 18th: Knowing That God is With Us in Our Suffering**
 - May 25th: No Class - Memorial Day Weekend
 - June 1st: Rejoicing in the Midst of Our Suffering
 - June 8th: Growing in the Midst of Our Suffering
 - June 15th: When Believers Face Tragedy
 - June 22nd: Walking With Others in Their Suffering

INTRODUCTION

- As Christians, it can be difficult (or almost impossible) to know that God is with us during our darkest and most needful hour.
- “The hope we have is more than a theological system or some wisdom principles for everyday life. Our hope rests on the willing, faithful, powerful, and loving presence of God with us. It is the ultimate gift of gifts to everyone who walks the harsh and bumpy road between birth and eternity. God has given us no sweeter, more beautiful gift than the gift of himself. He is the gift that changes everything. Our hope is not found in understanding why God brings hardship into our lives. Our hope is not found in the belief that somehow we will tough our way through. Our hope is not found in doctors, lawyers, pastors, family, or friends. Our hope is not found in our resilience or ingenuity. Our hope is not found in ideas or things. Though we may look to all those for temporary help, ultimately our hope rests in the faithful and gracious presence of the Lord with us.”¹
- All throughout the Bible we read of two “places” that God is...the heavens and with us.
- In our humanness, we can’t be in two places at once, yet the Bible describes God as literally being in all places at all times.²

TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE OF GOD AS OUR COMFORT

- We have been talking about God’s sovereignty and His purposes in our suffering, but where is God when we are in our suffering.
- It’s one thing to know that God is in control and to know that what we are facing is from a loving God and has purpose...but it’s something altogether different to know that He is with us *in* our suffering.
- There are two ways that theologians have described God’s relationship with His creation: immanence and transcendence. Knowing these two ideas about God will bring comfort and hope to the suffering believer.
- “Theism has always believed in a God who is both transcendent and immanent. Deism removed God from the world, and stressed His transcendence at the expense of His immanence. Under the influence of Pantheism, however, the pendulum swung in the other direction. It identified God and the world, and did not recognize a Divine Being, distinct from, and infinitely exalted above, His creation.”³

¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/two-verses-held-me-through-suffering>

² The question of God being in Hell is a common one in biblical Christianity. The simple answer is yes, since God is omnipresent, He must be there; to some degree. Furthermore, since all things are held together by the power of His word (Heb 1:3; Col 1:16-17), to some degree He is aware and making sure that Hell never goes away. What is lacking in Hell? That would be, not the presence of the Lord, but the relationship with the Lord. All things will take place before His face (Rev 14:10), but God’s relationship with them will never come to fruition (2 Thess 1:9). For a detailed look at this, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/is-god-present-or-absent-in-hell>

³ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans publishing co., 1938), 24.

- We need to know that God is transcendent, over and outside of His creation. But we must also know that God is ever present in every place and time within His own creation.
- We can see both of these concepts in **Ephesians 4:6** “...one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”
- We should never diminish one of these for the other. God is still greatly glorified when He is with us, but we also should not think of God like us since He does rule in the heavens.

Divine Transcendence

- In general terms, this means that God is beyond us. He is separate from His creation; He is exalted above us.
- In **Ephesians 4:6**, this is what Paul means when he says that God is *over all*.
- It is helpful for us to look at this not as God is so far away that we can't ever know Him.
- When speaking of transcendence, it has the idea of lordship and authority; without losing the concept of God is outside of time and space...yet still inhabits it.
- God's transcendence should give us comfort since we know that He is Lord, He is sovereign, and that He is King over all His created world.
- “When Scripture speaks of God as “high,” “exalted,” “lifted up,” it is not saying that he lives far away from us so that we can't know him. Rather, it's saying that God is King, that he is Lord. In other words, biblical transcendence is God's lordship attributes of control and authority.”⁴
- This truth reinforces what we know to be true about God's power in our world.
- There is nothing that comes upon us that God is outside of God's control.
- “When we think of the notion of transcendence, we think of something beyond the pale of our mundane existence—eating crackers, driving to the laundromat, shouting at the neighbor's incessantly barking dog to shut up. When you stop and take the time to gaze at the Milky Way or get lost in a sunset where the sky is all ablaze in red and orange and vermilion hues, you may find yourself transported to an otherworldly place of wonder where all of a sudden the things of this earth fade into nonimportance. Ultimately, transcendence points us to the incomprehensible wonder and vastness of God.”⁵
- To be sure, God's transcendence does not mean that He is hidden from us and that we can't know Him.
- It is a mistake, often repeated throughout human history, that words cannot describe or tell of God since He is so far removed from us.

⁴ John M. Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 13.

⁵ Christensen, *Defeating Evil*, 44-45.

- Theologians throughout the centuries have had a hard time fully embracing and describing what it means that God is transcendent.
- This is due to the fact that we, His creation, cannot comprehend what it means to be God who is on high, ruling from a throne, yet without a body and with no outside constraints.
- I believe this is where Paul's expression of praise is not just practical but very appropriate...
 - **Romans 11:33-36** "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen."

Divine Immanence

- When speaking of divine immanence, it is the idea that God is with us, or that He is close to us.
- God is not like our worldly kings and presidents and prime ministers. They have no idea what is happening in the lives of the people whom they preside over.
 - They care not for the needs of all the people. They don't know what is happening in your house or with your family.
 - They are not coming to your bedside when you're suffering or making sure that you have money to make your monthly budget.
 - In fact, it would be absolutely impossible for any earthly ruler to effectively rule any territory if they had to know the needs of every single person.
 - That's why we have representatives in our government who "represent" the groups of people to our government so that our voices are heard.
- This is not how God rules over His creation. He is so great and mighty that He knows what each of His people will ever need for all time. He rules in such a way that it seems He is our personal Lord and Sovereign ruler.
- "God's control and authority are such that he is present, immanent in all of his creation. We know already that God's immanence is not some kind of opposite to God's transcendence, some paradoxical negation of transcendence. Rather it is a necessary implication of his transcendence."⁶

⁶ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/divine-transcendence-immanence/>

- “A belief in God’s immanence holds that God is present in all of creation, while remaining distinct from it. In other words, there is no place where God is not. His sovereign control extends everywhere simultaneously.”⁷
- The name of Jesus shows us the immanence of God.
 - **Matthew 1:23** "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US."
 - עִמָּנוּאֵל Literally meaning, *God (לֵא) With (עִם) Us (נִי)*. This is how we get the Immanuel.
- While God being above all and outside of all His creation brings us comfort because that means that He is not bound by anything created.
- Knowing that He is, at the same time, within His creation and acting upon His creation, brings a different kind of comfort to the believer.

THE USE OF ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN SCRIPTURE

- “This word, from Gr. *anthrōpos*, mankind, a man, and *morphē*, a form, means literally, man-form-ism and signifies the representation of God in speech, or writing in the form of a human being.”⁸
- “Human traits and actions such as talking, holding, reaching, feeling, hearing, and the like, all of which are chronicled throughout both the Old and New Testaments, are ascribed to the Creator. We read of God’s actions, emotions, and appearance in human terms, or at least in words we normally accept and associate with humans.”⁹
- God is spirit and does not have a body like man. He is not made in any fashion or likeness as we are made.
- If this is true, why do the Scriptures constantly use human traits to describe the God?
- “Anthropomorphisms can be helpful in enabling us to at least partially comprehend the incomprehensible, know the unknowable, and fathom the unfathomable. But God is God, and we are not, and all of our human expressions are intrinsically inadequate in explaining fully and properly the divine. But human words, emotions, features, and knowledge are all that our Creator provided us, so these are all that we can understand in this earthly world at this time.”
- Unlike movements like the Emergent or Progressive Church, words are sufficient (to the degree that God uses them) to give us what we need to know about all things pertaining to God.

⁷ <https://www.gotquestions.org/immanence-of-God.html>

⁸ Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* (Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2005), 25.

⁹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/anthropomorphism.html>

- As both beliefs are based on post-modernism, their fundamental structure says that one cannot know the truth. Therefore, since we are created man and God is infinite, He must communicate to us in ways that we can understand and that may not be directly from God.
- So, we get the belief that all truth is relative (meaning subjective, intuitive, experiential, etc.) to the person who is trying to find the truth.
- We believe that since God created us, He knows how to best communicate to us. He has told us that He is not like us (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Mal 3:6; Hos 11:9; Job 9:32) but since He created us, He knows who we are and how He needs to communicate to us.
- He can describe Himself to us using language that is familiar to us, without having those definitions be placed upon Himself.
- In other words, just because God describes Himself as one who “sat on the throne” (Ps 9:4), does not mean that we now picture God literally sitting on a throne.
- In this particular context, it is giving the reader a sense of God’s authority, specifically judging righteously.
- Anthropomorphisms are extremely important and valuable in the Bible, but they are not there to make God like us, but to give us an idea of how God acts, thinks, moves, emotes, etc. in our own words.

THE MEANS THAT GOD USES TO COMFORT US IN OUR AFFLICTION

- **Psalm 103:13-14** “Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him. ¹⁴For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust.”
- **Verse 14** is not translated as literally as it could be from the Hebrew. (for good reason)
 - A wooden literal translation would say “For He, He knows, He Himself knows our frame, He is mindful that dust we *are*.”
 - There is an emphasis on God here that is missed in the English rendering so that it will be easier for the reader.
 - But the Psalmist wants the Hebrew reader to know that God knows us better than we think we know ourselves. It is from this knowledge of us (mankind) that our loving Father operates His personal and personalized care for His people “who fear Him.”
- “David here annihilates all the worth which men would arrogate to themselves, and asserts that it is the consideration of our misery, and that alone, which moves God to exercise patience towards us. This again we ought carefully to mark, not only for the purpose of subduing the pride of our flesh, but also that a sense of our unworthiness may not prevent us from trusting in God. The more wretched and despicable our

condition is, the more inclined is God to show mercy, for the remembrance that we are clay and dust is enough to incite him to do us good.”¹⁰

- It is an interesting thought from Calvin. That the more pitiful we are, the more mercy we get from God.
- The weaker we are in our flesh, the stronger the Lord is on our behalf.
- When we are weak, we are prone to either look to ourselves or to the Lord. What does it look like to go to the Lord and allow His strength to empower us in our suffering?
- In other words, how does know demonstrate in our lives that He is with us, that He has compassion for us and knows that we are but dust.

Ordinary Means of Grace¹¹

- **Acts 2:41-42** “So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were *continually devoting themselves* to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”
- There are four things here that should be part of our normal life (both inside and outside the church). Notice that in **verse 41** it was the ones who had received the word and baptized. In other words, the normal Christian's means of receiving God's sustaining grace is these four things.
- As the above-mentioned article makes clear, these are *ordinary* means of grace. While the extraordinary is always possible with God, our hope should be in the ordinary that God has given to us.
- If we neglect the ordinary in our times of suffering, we are going to miss out on what God may have for us.
- **Teaching of the Word:**
 - **Romans 15:4** “For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”
 - There is no real hope outside of the Scriptures.
 - To know what God says about Himself and you, it is important to go to God's Word.
 - We go there to find hope in our situation. We can see the closeness of God and have our strength renewed so that we can keep going another day.
 - We can connect with fellow believers from the past and see how they handled themselves in times of great struggle.
 - We can read the Psalmist struggle with their emotional heights and lows.
 - **Psalms 40:11-12** “You, O LORD, will not withhold Your compassion from me; Your lovingkindness and Your truth will continually preserve me. For evils beyond number have surrounded me; My

¹⁰ John Calvin and James Anderson, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 4 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Software, 2010), 137–138.

¹¹ Great explanation of this at <https://www.9marks.org/article/why-the-ordinary-means-of-grace-must-be-central-in-our-gatherings/>

iniquities have overtaken me, so that I am not able to see; They are more numerous than the hairs of my head, and my heart has failed me.”

- **Fellowship with the body:**

- **Hebrews 10:23-25** “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”
- There should be regular encouragement happening as we gather together, both in a corporate and individual setting.
- This is a normal part of one another ministry in any given church.
- The author says *Let us* as in the whole community, *hold fast the confession of hope*. We need to help one another keep that hope as the end of this life continues to come closer and closer.

- **Participation in the ordinances:**

- **Matthew 26:26-28** “While they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body.’ And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.’”
- This is for the remembrance of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross and the fact that He has forgiven our sins. As we take communion, we remember the abundance of grace that God poured out upon us as Jesus took the penalty for our sins.
- **Romans 6:4** “Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”
- “Baptism is a means of grace because it reminds us of who we are and what God has done for us. Baptism does not save, but it points us to the grace of God and to the riches of God in Christ.”¹²

- **Corporate and individual prayer:**

- **Hebrews 4:16** “Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, *so that* we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”
- Times of distress and despair God does not say “run away!” but rather “come to me!”
- We need that mercy and grace all the time, but especially in those times of need.

¹² <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2020/06/the-sacraments-as-means-of-grace/#:~:text=Baptism%20is%20a%20means%20of,in%20Christian%20life%20and%20worship.>