

Suffering and Sovereignty, Week 2

“The Suffering of God”, chapter 7 of *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering* by Tim Keller

1. Think of a time in your life when you have experienced or witnessed suffering. What was hardest about it?
 - a. The profound pain
 - b. It felt meaningless or without redeeming value
 - c. God could have prevented it but didn't
 - d. All/none of the above?
2. In the second full paragraph of 151, Keller quotes the following passages which describe how we share in Christ's suffering:
 - 1 Pet 4:13—suffering for your beliefs
 - Col 1:24—suffering at the hands of powers and authorities (i.e., forces bigger than yourself)
 - Phil 3:10—Paul's suffering due to setting aside his life as an accomplished and respected Pharisee to follow Jesus
 - 2 Cor 4:16-17—suffering experienced in ministry (being let down and betrayed by those you minister to, hardship, stress, confusion, etc.)

Only one of these verses directly addresses suffering *not* unique to believers (e.g. health problems, financial reversals, natural disasters, etc.). Aside from the book of Job, suffering of this sort is addressed in an organic way in Scripture, as in Psalm 23, where David is not spared the valley of death, but is instead given a meal there; or in Jesus' teachings about lilies and sparrows (Mt 6:25-34), where the disciples are told “not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.” Jesus doesn't deny that sparrows fall or lilies wither, but still tells them not to be afraid (Mt 10:31) and not to worry. Some of this is surely a reflection that we live not just in this life but eternity (Mt 10:29) and some is that God knows our needs and is a loving Father (Mt 7:7-11) and really *does* provide for us when it is best for us to do so. Bearing this in mind, is the best preparation for suffering to

- a. Remind ourselves daily of those times in the past when God was there for us
 - b. Remind ourselves daily of the bigger picture (eternity, the kingdom)
 - c. Actively see and expect God's intervention in little things so we are practiced in discernment when big things are needed
 - d. Carefully *avoid* finding God's hand in the little things so we aren't devastated when it all goes south and God's hand seems conspicuously absent
 - e. Daily “renormalize” and “reframe” by recognizing that we live comfortable lives in the richest country on earth in a time of great prosperity, so we don't start feeling entitled to a stability which can't and won't last
3. Keller quotes McCartney as saying, “Christ learned humanhood from his suffering (Heb 5:8); [And therefore] we learn Christhood from our suffering.” Keller adds, “Just as Jesus assumed human likeness through suffering (Heb 2:18; 4:14-15), so we can grow into Christ's likeness through it, *if we face it in faith and patience*” (152, *emph. added*). Have you seen either positive or negative examples of Keller's caveat? And if we could face suffering with faith and patience, would we even need Keller's book?

4. Read the paragraph beginning “That leads to” on p. 153, and the following paragraph on 154. Is Keller saying that all suffering is ultimately meaningful though, like his eight-year-old (or Job for that matter) we may not know the reason? Or, since some suffering is “unjust” (chapter six), some suffering is also meaningless?
5. Read the paragraph beginning “In Revelation 5” on 155. What helps us to find the meaning in suffering?
6. There are many theories of why Jesus had to die (soteriologies). The most popular among evangelicals is the *satisfaction* theory, which says that Jesus had to die to pay for our sins. This is just one facet of the biblical view, and by itself it leaves some questions unanswered. For instance, if Jesus’ *death* was the only necessity, why did he have to live a life marked by increasing levels of suffering?¹ While *satisfaction* offers no clues, Scripture helps us to see other reasons. Read Phil 2:3-15; Heb 2:18, 4:14-15, 5:8. What does each of these say about why Jesus suffered? Does any of these speak to why *we too* must suffer?
7. Keller writes, “Evil is defeated because God uses it to bring about its very opposite—courage, faithfulness, selfless sacrifice, forgiveness” (157). In this way the evil we suffer is turned back on itself to conquer the evil within us.
 - a. Can you think of an example you have seen of this?
 - b. Can we still say this when the subject of suffering is a child?
8. In Andi’s story (160),
 - a. what helped put her in a position to respond with trust to the long and painful experience of her divorce?
 - b. Is it possible that the fruit of a Christian’s faith is not cognitive belief but trust in the face of suffering?
 - c. Think of an example of suffering you’ve seen (in yourself or others) and describe how this trust would, could or did play out.

Fun fact: The Roman emperor Hadrian, considered one of the “good emperors”, had an aversion to mutilation (bravo) which led him to rule that castration should be treated as murder. It also led him to outlaw circumcision (seems reasonable?), which may have inadvertently led to the Bar Kokhba revolt in 132 AD, and a lot of very irate Jews. (Thanks to Susan for this FF.)

¹ Jesus was an immigrant as a young child when his family was forced to flee to Egypt; in an honor-shame society, he was born out of wedlock; his father is believed to have died before he reached adulthood, he was denied, by his mission, a spouse and family; and during his ministry years, despite his brief popularity, aside from losing a beloved cousin to a political murder, he was widely misunderstood, slandered and even physically assaulted—all prior to his passion.

Leader's Intro:

This week we consider the ways in which we worship a suffering God. We wrestle in this with questions of how to respond when suffering appears meaningless.

This chapter gets a little closer to the heart of the matter. When we suffer, or see others suffer, there are many ways in which it is challenging, even outrageous: It can seem meaningless. It can squash our faith. It seems unnecessary. It feels inconsistent with a loving God. It leads to a depression which can leave us unable to act.

In this chapter we look at where God sits with suffering. In particular, we look at the way God suffers for us, and the way we participate in suffering with God. This raises questions like what suffering has meaning for believers. In some sense, all suffering does, in that it can bring about Christlikeness in us. But in another sense suffering can be very remote from its meaning, as the suffering caused by other humans, who are allowed their own agency in this world. God permits sin because he values freedom. Philosophically that may be meaningful, but in our lives it is hard not to wonder why God doesn't do more to protect us from one another.

Still, we must start by asking what role suffering played in Jesus' life and what role it must play in ours. Hence this chapter.

Extra questions and observations:

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2. ...
3. ...
- 4.

Notes

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I. Background

a. ...

II. Words and Phrases

a. ...

III. Themes

a. ...

IV. Observations

a. ...

V. Questions

a. ...

VI. To do

a. ...