

Suffering and Sovereignty, Week 3

Chapters 7 (“The Suffering of God”) and 14 (“Praying”) of *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering* by Tim Keller

1. Psychiatrist and holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl described meaning as the key to enduring suffering. He expressed this with the equation $D = S - M$, indicating that despair is suffering minus meaning, and the more meaning we find in suffering, the less our despair. 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 although we may not know the reason? Or, since some suffering is “unjust” (chapter six), is some suffering is also meaningless?
2. 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. Can you think of an example you have seen of this? Can we still say this when the subject of suffering is a child?
3. Read p. 155, par. 2. What does the scroll of Revelation 5 contain and why can Jesus open it?
4. There are many theories of why Jesus had to die (soteriologies). The most popular among evangelicals is the *satisfaction* theory, which observes that Jesus had to die to pay for our sins. This is one facet, and 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? Read Rom 8:14-17. Does the Bible indicate why we also must suffer?
5. A healthy prayer life is central to enduring adversity. One scheme divides prayer into worship, thanksgiving, petition, intercession and spiritual warfare. Schemes like this are meant to ensure our prayers aren’t lopsided, focusing only on a few types of prayer. Another corrective comes from reminding ourselves why we pray in the first place. Read the “principles of prayer” (see reverse). In the biblical perspective on prayer, *why* do we pray? If prayer is all about building our relationship with God and centering us on his eternal truths, *how* do we pray?
6. Read Keller, beginning with “what if you fell in love” (p. 273, 3rd full par.), to the end of the excerpt on 275. Keller is discussing value of Job’s suffering. (a) In your experience, what causes a child’s love for a parent to deepen? (b) Keller and Lewis argue that suffering is *needed* to deepen our relationship with God. Our doubts say that suffering may lead to growth but might also cause emotional disability and even loss of faith. Would God really use a means of growth which might crush a person? Are Keller and Lewis just rationalizing the hard truth that life contains meaningless suffering?
7. Two-way communication is central to any healthy relationship, and prayer is our primary form of communication with God. How often do we hear from God? Listen to McCallum, “The Thorn in the Flesh,” 15:00-20:00, which presents one believer’s experiences in this area. How have you heard from God?

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.

Principles of Prayer

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| Prayer is the engine of change (i.e., don't expect things to change without prayer) | James 4:2; Rom 12:12; 15:30 |
| Prayer is about you and God , not about impressing others | Mt 6:5-6; but also 1 Cor 14:16 |
| Verbally recognize God as your "papa" or "daddy" | Mt 6:9 |
| Use prayer to remind yourself of kingdom realities and eternal truths : God is <i>the</i> Holy One; this world will pass away and only the eternal (i.e. souls) will remain, God is at work in the world, etc. ² | Mt 6:10 |
| Ask God for what you need, in confidence, and share all your anxieties with him... | Mt 6:12; 1 Peter 5:6-7; Phil 4:6-7; 1 Jn 5:14-15; and so many Pss |
| ...but not because he doesn't already know , but because he's your papa... | Mt 6:32 |
| ...who loves to give you good gifts | Mt 7:7-11 |
| Reconcile with God as you would with anyone else (and reconcile with them too) | Mt 6:12 |
| Ask God to protect you from those things that cause you to sin and break relationships with him and others and pray intelligently against the enemy | Mt 6:13; Eph 6 |
| Pray for those things which God cares about ("seek first the kingdom of God"), i.e., ask yourself what God cares about, align your goals with his , and then pray for those | Mt 6:33 |
| Pray boldly, shamelessly, persistently (but not with mindless repetition; Mt 6:7), based not on who you (righteous? Hah!) are but based on who he is (merciful and loving) ³ | Lk 1:5-10; 18:1-9; 18:10-14 |
| Keep praying even when God appears to have abandoned you | Pss 42-43; Job |
| Let the Spirit guide your prayers (even asking the Spirit to do so), and if you are so gifted don't neglect to pray in tongues | Rom 6:26-27; Eph 6:18 |



Fun quote: "I think there is no labor greater than that of prayer to God. For every time a man wants to pray, his enemies, the demons, want to prevent him, for they know that it is only by turning him from prayer that they can hinder his journey. Whatever good work a man undertakes, if he perseveres in it, he will attain rest. But prayer is warfare to the last breath." —Abba Agathon (one of the desert fathers)

² "If Jesus' confidence in petitionary prayer is well founded we are led to an astonishing ontological recognition: that God rules the world in constant consultation with those who pray, that God's determinations are wrought in dialogue with those who call for help." (Roman Goetz, *Christian Century*, Jan 29, 1997, p. 96)

³ We often pray too small. Dorothy Jean Weaver writes about Lk 11:8-0, "Prayer is the gut-wrenching desperation that digs through the roof tiles or claws through the crowds to reach the healer on the other side (5:17-26; 8:40-48). It is the unimaginable trust to believe in a miracle sight unseen (7:1-20). It is the sheer audacity to throw all caution to the wind and break every rule on the books in a scandalous and highly public display of love and repentance (7:36-50). It is the utter impertinence to cry out loudly and persistently for healing (18:35-43) and justice (18:1-8) until those cries are heard. This is the prayer to which Jesus calls his disciples." (*Interpretation*, July 2002, p. 317)

Leader's Intro:

This is a hybrid study. We are finishing up Keller 7 on suffering, which includes a lot about meaning—how all suffering can bring us closer to God and therefore no suffering is meaningless. This *does* require us to come face to face with our doubts regarding the times when suffering breaks someone. Why does God do or allow that? (And remember that Jesus knows individuals, for instance, can wreck the faith of a “little one” and warns us of dire punishments for doing this.)

The second half turns to prayer, which is clearly central to our enduring suffering. But prayer at the same time is typically not done in a way consistent with the biblical view of prayer, and is not taken seriously. (I.e., we devote few resources to it.) Since God knows what we need already, it can't be about informing him of anything. It is about building a relationship, about setting through the ephemeral world around us to the eternal truths and realities which lie beneath, and about shaping our thoughts so they are like Jesus'. As we do this we prepare ourselves for suffering. This doesn't mean that suffering will be easy, but it does mean that when this get hard we have a relationship to turn to.

Ultimately, the discussion on prayer is meant to move us toward addressing the question of why God does not always hear prayers when we are suffering, and how we should respond to that.

Extra questions and observations:

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3. ...
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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. ...