

SUFFERING: Not Solving a Riddle, But Navigating a Journey

Often when Christians talk about suffering, we focus exclusively on *the problem of evil*. We try to answer the question, “If God is all good and all powerful, how can suffering still exist?” That’s an important question. But if Christians focus exclusively on this question, we come across as God’s defense attorneys, rather than God’s ambassadors to those who are hurting.

I’ve always appreciated how C.S. Lewis set up his primary book on suffering.

“I must add, too, that the only purpose of this book is to solve the intellectual problem raised by suffering; for the far higher task of teaching fortitude and patience I was never fool enough to suppose myself qualified, nor have I anything to offer my readers except my conviction that when pain is to be borne, a little courage helps more than much knowledge, a little human sympathy more than much courage, and the least tincture of the love of God more than all.”
C.S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain*, page xii (Preface)

C.S. Lewis recognized that we can “solve the riddle” of evil and not resolve the lived experience of suffering. What we want to spend our time doing is learning how to navigate the experience of suffering well.

That begs the question, “**What does it mean to understand and apply the Bible well?**” Let’s take the familiar Psalm 23, known as *The Psalm of the Good Shepherd*. How would we know if we got out of Psalm 23 what God intended to give us? “The ability to pass a quiz on ancient, Eastern shepherding practices” is not the answer. That is a purely cognitive approach.

We have applied the Bible well, when we respond to God as a passage invites us to. That means we have understood and applied Psalm 23 when we trust God, like a sheep trusts a shepherd, in good times (“green pastures,” v. 2) and bad times (“the valley of the shadow of death,” v. 4). Knowing the historical references for metaphors is helpful, but it’s not the point.

The **goal of this lesson** is to serve as an introduction to biblical books that focus on suffering like Job, Lamentations, various psalms of lament, and I Peter. We want to set you up to read these books on suffering in a way that cultivates the responses of faith, hope, and trust. These are the responses God intended to cultivate in the original readers, and in you.

Start by Admitting, “Suffering Is Hard.”

Where does any journey begin? Every journey begins where we are. That may seem obvious. When we’re traversing geography, it is. *But when we’re navigating our emotions, we often want to start “where we ought to be.”* The problem with that is, we can’t start where we’re not. That’s demoralizing. *No book of the Bible asks us to pretend that suffering is easy.*

In light of this, let’s consider **two benefits of being honest about hard times.**

1. *Being fake reinforces the idea that everyone is responding better than we are.* This creates a social pressure that tempts us to further isolate. We need a church culture that frequently asks, “How are you doing?” and patiently waits for an honest reply. The Bible assumes it is being read in community, not in isolation.
2. *If we don’t know how to be sad, we will be bad.* Many of our most enslaving vices are means of escaping unpleasant emotions. We are fortunate to live in an era in history when most discomforts can be alleviated. But that means many of us haven’t learned to endure suffering well, to find meaning in hardship, or to allow others to walk with us in hard times. *Honesty is the first step towards being sad instead of being bad. You’ll never be more free than you are honest.*

Don’t Rush from Hard to Hope

Often, the next thing we want to say as Christian is, “But, there is hope.” And there is. But we don’t have to rush. We don’t want to be like the orthodontist who promises they can align a teenager’s teeth in only 6 weeks. That’s too fast.

How do we tend to rush ourselves in suffering? One way is that we moralize the experience. We ask things like, “What is God trying to teach me in this difficult time?” This is not a bad question. But it implies that once I learn the lesson, the season of hardship will be over, and if the season persists, I must be resisting what God is trying to teach me. *We serve a God who delights to make himself known. If there is something we need to learn, he won’t play hard to get.* That’s never been God’s style.

Historically, the church has been more skilled with sin-based struggles than suffering-based struggles. It’s clearer to see how the gospel applies to sin. Jesus lived the sinless life we were supposed to live. He paid the price our sin deserved. We get saved from the penalty of sin. But we don’t get saved from the experience of suffering, at least not this side of heaven.



We need to realize we have a Savior who both died and cried in our place. The book of Hebrews repeatedly emphasizes how the suffering of Jesus is meant to draw us towards him, because he understands the various hardships we face (Hebrews 2:17-18, 4:14-16). We come to him in confidence, without doubt regarding (a) if we'll be received or (b) if he will understand.

Let's think about how most of the Bible was written from the end of the story, that is, *looking back with awe*. Moses wrote the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy) at the end of his life. The four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) were written knowing Jesus rose from the dead. That is wonderful, because it allows for completeness.

But we live mid-story, that is, *looking forward with angst*. Think of your favorite movie or book. Were things resolved mid-story? No. When we expect an "end of the story" response from ourselves, when we're mid-story, we are rushing. We want to express a faithful mid-story response. Where do we find that in the Bible? There may be no better place than the Psalms.

Psalms are unique in two important ways when it comes to navigating suffering. **First**, they are written mid-story and validate many of the mid-story emotions we feel. **Second**, they are written with God as the audience. Most of the Bible is words from God to us. Psalms are words given to us by God to speak back to him. That's good, because many of the things in Psalms are things we would feel guilty saying without God's permission.

Psalms and Emotional Heresy

God invites us to put our honest doubts and fears into words, even when those experiences are inaccurate.

- God is felt to be hiding from us in our troubles (Ps 10:1).
- God is felt to be forgetful or uninterested in our suffering (Ps 13:1; 44:24).
- God is felt to have forsaken those who cry out to him (Ps 22:1-2).
- God is felt to be asleep and, therefore, unaware of what's going on in our lives (Ps 44:23).
- God is felt to have abandoned his people forever (Ps 74:1).
- God is felt to have aggressively "spiked" an innocent person in anger (Ps 102:10).

We do not have to choose between honesty and reverence because of psalms like these. God is not agreeing that our experience is objectively true, but he is demonstrating his willingness to put compassion before instruction. His compassion can strengthen his children enough to be able to eventually hear and receive the truth.

You might ask, "Where is faith and hope in putting dark feelings into words?" We realize we have a sturdy God. God is not insecure, demanding that no one question him. God wants to transform our suffering, but he is willing to enter our story and transform it from within. In this, God continues to do incarnational ministry.

"Psalm 88 gives us hope in our grief precisely because it has no hope in it! It means that God understands the darkness we face. He is right there in it with us, 'an ever-present help in trouble' (Ps. 46:1). The Lord of light is your friend in darkness (p. 5)." Paul Tripp in *Grief: Finding Hope Again*

Illustration: I tried to mirror the value of these psalms in the "Papa's an Idiot" letter, a tradition I have with my two sons (bradhambrick.com/papas-an-idiot-letter-and-heretical-psalms). They are meant to be an invitation to conversation in hard times.

Strategies to Suffer Well

So far, we've focused on being honest to off-load emotional burdens during suffering. Metaphorically speaking, we have tried to take weight out of our backpack. But, even if the emotional backpack is as light as possible, it does not make a long journey shorter. We will consider **four strategies** to help us endure during an extended journey through suffering.

1. *Don't isolate.* Every journey is easier with a companion. Frodo needed Sam. That's why we want you to use this material within your small group. Engage with people you can look at as they sympathetically nod to say, "Yeah, me too." If you don't have a small group, you might consider one of our subject-specific G4 groups for support and recovery (summitchurch.com/G4) to help you build community.
2. *Care for yourself physically.* Get adequate **sleep**. Eat **healthy foods** in balanced portions. Get some cardiovascular **exercise** (few things are more effective for offsetting depression and anxiety). This is not about getting in the best



shape of your life. It merely recognizes that our bodies have a significant impact on our emotions. This is how God initially cared for Elijah when he was profoundly discouraged (1 Kings 19:4-8).

3. *Identify available choices.* *When we can't choose what we want most (i.e., COVID to be over), we begin to think we don't have any choices at all.* If we surrender to this vein of thinking, we will despair. **Make a list** of the choices available to you. Even if the available choices don't "fix" everything, what choices alleviate, offset, relieve, or assuage the challenge? This is why biblical books on suffering still have commands. Our choices matter. That builds hope.
4. *Identify meaningful activity.* When you've done what you can do to offset the challenges directly related to your suffering, engage with the things you enjoy and find meaningful. *When life is hard, it can easily begin to feel meaningless.* Encouraging a friend, writing a song, finishing a project, exercising, cooking a good meal, and other meaningful activities can be acts of defiance to the sense of meaninglessness. This is why biblical books on suffering emphasize one-another care.

The Road to Romans 8:28

As we begin to conclude, let's consider one of the most frequently cited passages of Scripture about suffering. This can be a love-hate passage for people who are hurting. *Because Romans 8:28 is powerful, if it is used well, it brings great comfort. But if it is used poorly, it brings great pain.* What I would like to do is walk into Romans 8:28 slowly, tracing the steps Paul took starting in verse 25, to arrive at the hope-giving conclusion we frequently reference in hard times.

1. *Hope (v. 25)* – We tend to think of hope as a pleasant word. It is a virtue. But the experience of hoping always means waiting. Waiting means what we desire for at the moment is not present. Paul is being honest.
2. *Don't See (v. 25)* – Paul says that what we hope for is not just "not present." It is also "out of sight." The kind of hardship Paul is speaking to is one where the desired outcome doesn't seem feasible. Paul is being really honest.
3. *Patience (v. 25)* – This is another virtue word that we assume will be pleasant. Waiting requires patience. Being patient is miserable. When we see someone being patient, we never want to trade places with them.
4. *Weakness (v. 26)* – How does all the hoping and waiting feel? In a word, weak. Suffering reminds us how powerless we are. *In that sense, suffering is not just painful; it's also insulting.* That's why we often **feel ashamed** when we suffer.
5. *Don't Know What to Pray (v. 26)* – How else do we feel? Stupid. We don't even know what to say. Add a sense of ignorance to powerlessness and this is why we often **feel despair** when we suffer. Paul is getting raw-level honest.
6. *Spirit Intercedes with Groans (v. 26)* – Now a bit of hope begins to emerge, but it's subtle hope. *We realize that not even our silence can be silent before God. The Holy Spirit is translating our groans to the Father.* We don't have to know what to say. The relief of being known, seen, and cared for begins to emerge.
7. *Searches Hearts (v. 27)* – We don't have to worry about being misrepresented. The Holy Spirit, who resides in every Christian, can translate our pain perfectly. God's ability to love and care for us is not dependent on our ability to articulate what we need. We don't have to be in control; we just need to cooperate.
8. *According to God's Will (v. 27)* – If you look at verses 29-30, you will get a sense for what God's will is in this passage: our sanctification. God is promising to use these hard experiences to make us more like Jesus. While that may not be the only thing God does, we can rest assured he will do this. That gives some meaning and value to the experience.
9. *For Good (v. 28)* – We tend to want to add the word "more" before the word "good." When we do this, we start trying to do emotional math. Is the good God did greater than the pain we experienced? Was it worth it? Emotional math in suffering tries to weigh the brightness of a sunrise against the coldness of the night. Let's put the scales away and simply trust that God will be good.

As a final word, let's return to Psalm 23:1-4. I will take the liberty of emphasizing one word.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.



Even though I *walk* through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Why did I choose to emphasize the word “walk”? It is a pacing verb. It reveals the pace at which the Good Shepherd is willing to go. *The Good Shepherd moves at the pace of the sheep*. The scary setting – that is, “the valley of the shadow of death” – does not accelerate the pace to the detriment of the sheep.

As we read biblical books on suffering, let’s study them with these **three overarching principles** in mind:

1. *God gave us the Bible to bring us into community with himself and the church*. Every book of the Bible is written to a group of people. As God said from the beginning, “It is not good to be alone (Genesis 2:18).” If that was true in the pre-fall Garden of Eden, it is more true now in a world marred by sin and suffering.
2. *God gave us the Bible as an invitation to be honest about our sin and suffering*. Every book of the Bible is embarrassingly honest. Salvation begins with the admission of sin (Romans 3:23). Healing and comfort from suffering begins with being honest about the hardship. *Honesty is the door to transformative relationships*.
3. *The God who inspired the Bible is a patient shepherd*. We lose hope when we think, “I just can’t keep up.” With God, that is a phrase we never need to fear. For the church to be a good ambassador of the Good Shepherd, you need to share your hardship. Neither the church, nor your small group, can “search hearts” (Romans 8:27) like the Holy Spirit can.

If we converted these three principles into actions, they would be: **be known, be vulnerable, and receive patient care**. These are hard times. There are many reasons to be frustrated. But if we persevere in doing these things, we will experience God’s faithfulness in the midst of this suffering.

Follow-Up Resources

- *Making Peace with Romans 8:28* // article - bradhambrick.com/romans828. This article delves into more common misconceptions regarding suffering. If you benefited from this presentation, this article would be a good next read.
- *Negative Emotion Tolerance in the Pursuit of Sexual Purity* // blog post – bradhambrick.com/NET. While this post was written specifically towards sexual purity, it elaborates more fully on the concept “if we don’t know how to be sad, we will be bad” that was discussed in this presentation.

Questions for Small Group Study

When studying this lesson as a small group, we recommended that: (a) each participant reads this article in advance, (b) the group watches the 20-minute lesson together, and then (c) the group discusses the following questions:

1. What has been hard for you because of COVID and quarantine? *How are you doing?*
2. How are you doing at being sad, anxious, or upset? Are you able to maintain perspective within these emotions, or do they lead to habits of escape or exaggerative thoughts?
3. How have you been prone to “moralizing” your experience of suffering (i.e., feeling guilty for feeling bad during hard times)?
4. What comfort do you take from there being a little heresy in the psalms? What is a healthy and unhealthy use of these passages?
5. Which of the four strategies for suffering well (p. 2-3) would be most important for you implement at this time?
6. How does the journey from Romans 8:25 to 8:28 allow you to embrace this passage and utilize it with greater sensitivity?
7. How does seeing the pace of the Good Shepherd in Psalm 23 help you relax regarding how well, or how quickly, you are processing a difficult experience?