



Text: *"Where is God in all the suffering?"* by Amy Orr Ewing.

Teachers: David Bissette, Rev. Christian White

These notes can be found at: <https://davidbissette.com/>

## Session 1: Setting the Stage

### Goals of this study

- Survey the basics of what the Bible says about suffering
- Consider how the possibility of suffering was inherent in giving free will to humankind
- Gain an understanding of the nature and purposes of suffering
- Develop hope for an ultimate positive outcome from suffering
- Provide practical steps you can take to lessen your pain during suffering and find moments of joy even during very tough times.

A word of housekeeping—about time. During the pandemic many of us work on Zoom. In order prevent additional “Zoom tedium” we are going to try to keep these sessions to an hour, though we may go over a few minutes when it seems unavoidable. In light of this, though comments and questions are welcome, I ask you to keep them relatively focused. Also, after each session I will stay around for a few minutes for any further comments and discussion that you desire. If we do have to move a little rapidly through some material, hopefully these notes will give you a chance to reflect on things more thoughtfully at your leisure.

## Helpful hint #1: Balancing thoughts and feelings

Human suffering is one of the biggest mysteries of life. We live our lives as a daily reflection of our beliefs about suffering as well as our own experiences of it. Though we talk about God as loving and sovereign, suffering challenges our beliefs—and it's scary. Suffering is an emotionally laden topic for pretty much everyone.

So, as we go through the next five weeks I'm going to ask you to pay attention to yourself and your reactions. If you suddenly become angry or sad, know that this is a natural reaction and don't panic. Acknowledge it to yourself—and to us here if you desire. On the off chance that you should feel a bit overwhelmed it's ok to detach temporarily from strong feelings and simply notice them as they come and go, like leaves floating by on a stream. Feelings are important, of course, but it's also important not to be awash in them, and they don't necessarily reflect reality. Remember that life is full of hope, and that is where we're heading.

On the other hand, don't overly embrace cognition by itself either. Neither feeling nor cognition is an adequate guide in life. In simplistic terms, we have our thoughts in our heads, and our feelings in our bodies. When life is painful we tend to evacuate our bodies and move up into our heads to avoid pain. That's certainly understandable, and helpful in handling emergencies. But it's not a good idea to stay that way—we lose both joy and intuition (our "gut") when we do that—and end up being the person described as "running around unsupervised in their head". Our thoughts lose their stability and become erratic when we are not grounded in our bodies. Also, others do not experience us as fully "present" to them.

Balance is needed, of course. While feelings do add life and intuition, thoughts can add clarity and direction. But relying on either one alone creates instability. And when thoughts and emotions align with one another, you are more likely to have found wisdom—which is needed in the face of suffering.

By the way, at any point in your life, whether now or at a later time, if you become overwhelmed with any type of emotion or concern Christian and the other clergy are available to meet with you. Christian specifically asked me to tell you this. And if you have a preference for the gender of the person that you speak with, that will certainly be understood and honored.

## Helpful hint #2: "Truth is a two-sided coin"

You're going to hear a lot about two-sided coins in this study. That's because life itself is a like a two-sided coin, as is much theological truth. John Wesley often talked about embracing opposite statements in the Bible to find the full truth. Our need is often to learn which side of a truth to apply in a situation (which again is wisdom).

We all actually already do this. Think about which of these two things is true: "Birds of a feather flock together" and "Opposites attract". But like the Bible, we often don't talk about both sides of the coin at once, and at any moment we may talk about one side like the other doesn't exist. (There is one interesting exception to this in the Bible—Proverbs 26:4-5—where two opposite instructions are given in consecutive verses.)

Understanding this principle alone can make your Bible reading much less stressful.

With life, one side of the coin is about joy while the other is about obstacles and difficulties. Each week we will start out on a positive note, looking at a passage of scripture expressing hope and joy, before turning to life's more difficult aspects.

## The “joy of life” side of the coin



Romans 8:18-19 NRSV

*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.*

Romans 5:1-2 NRSV

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.*

These passages point toward a later time in history when our revelation as children of God will be revealed as glorious. There is lots to look forward to, beyond the joy that is promised to us now. It's an assured outcome.

So, the best is yet to come—a great topic for meditation when times are tough. *The hope of glory, and the glory of hope.*

## The “life is difficult” side of the coin



## The Great Dilemma

The great dilemma for God had to do with whether or not to create humankind if significant suffering for both God and us might be the result. There are three main factors involved in answering these questions.

- **First: It was God's plan to be our parent of sorts**

- This can be a confusing topic at times. The Bible presents God in the roles of both king and father at different times, and the two roles are distinctive (another two-sided coin).
- Also, in passing let me note the obvious, that both of these terms are in the masculine gender. It seems that God often had to limit self-revelation to concepts that people of the time would understand and be able to accept. The Bible has no language for a being without a specific gender during a culture that was almost

completely patriarchal. My belief is that even our current views of God continue to be primitive and deficient compared to what God is like. As we get to know God more and more our deepest desires and needs will be met.

Psalm 47:6-7

Sing praises to God, sing praises!

***Sing praises to our King***, sing praises!

***For God is the King of all the earth;***

sing praises with a psalm!

Isaiah 43: 5-7

Do not be afraid, for I am with you;

I will bring your children from the east  
and gather you from the west.

I will say to the north, 'Give them up!'

and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.'

***Bring my sons from afar***

***and my daughters from the ends of the earth—***

everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made."

2 Corinthians 6:16,18

"I will live in them and walk among them,  
and I will be their God,

***and they shall be my people...***

***and I will be your father,***

***and you shall be my sons and daughters,***

says the Lord Almighty."

Note: The middle passage above mentions that we were created for God's glory. God's glory is a frequent topic in scripture, particularly the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), and something that is apparently very important to God from the way God talks about it.

If we focused on our own glory as much as God seems to focus on God's glory in the Bible, we'd be in serious danger of being labeled a narcissist. Who wants to entrust themselves to a narcissist?

This is an important topic for suffering, but too big to get into very much here. Suffice it to say that ***further revelation*** (and this is key) in the New Testament talks more about God's humility, the other side of the coin. (Jesus actually washes his disciples' feet.) For me, both sides—God's power to save and God's humility to care—are necessary to feel "safe" during suffering. Unfortunately, there's lots of unhelpful, rather tone deaf material about God's glory on the internet, but check:

- <https://cct.biola.edu/humility-god-the-imitation-of-christ/>
- <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/is-glory-gods-only-goal/>

Our author says that our thoughts on suffering generally assume that people have inherent and sacred value by virtue of being human beings, and that the role of love is central to our discussion. Suffering can certainly make one feel unloved and add to the pain of suffering. This is part of the puzzle. Let's talk about that.

*Discussion:*

- What do you imagine that God, as our parent, feels about us?
  - How do you, or other parents, feel about their children?
  - How do you show it to others? Pictures on Facebook, among other ways?
  - What do you imagine that God feels about our suffering?
- **Second: On our own we tend to sabotage our lives (including our relationship with God) as well as our world and those in it.**

Genesis 3:6-7 When the serpent provided Eve with “misinformation” to create doubt about God’s motives and encourage her to disobey God...

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Matthew 23:37

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

Matthew 11:21

“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.”

- *Discussion:* In what ways do you see humanity sabotaging ourselves and others?

- **Third: All of this sabotaging is the result of free will, which we need if we are going to love God (or each other for that matter).**

## What is God to do? Creation or not?

*Discussion*

- If you were God, knowing all of this, would you still create humankind? Why?
- If you said yes, with both life on earth and eternity in mind, what would you actually do about our tendency to sabotage our own and others well-being?

- What do you do or see other parents actually do for their children to help them past their behaviors that are clearly a problem?

On **God's** side, creating humankind was a **huge** event. And the price that God would eventually pay for it to be successful was staggering.

- Actually, God paid a *daily* price after creation way before Jesus died on the cross, and still does.

On **our** side, one of the really hard issues involved in all of this is the scale of suffering that God allows. How much is just **too** much? Coming to terms with that is **way** more than an intellectual challenge.

- All of this by no means clears up everything, but it is a start.

## Homework

1. Read chapters 1-3: Asking why?, Anger, and Grief
2. Ponder:
  - What responsibilities might God-as-parent feel toward us? What about when we do wrong?
  - What about God acting as king? Would that be any different?
  - Don't expect to easily reconcile your thoughts with the suffering you see around yourself. We're just getting started.