

# Session 4: Our response to suffering is important

The last coin



From our book...

## Chapter 7 - Natural Disasters

When it comes to Christian theology, the impact of the wrongdoing of humankind on nature is not clear. Natural disasters plainly have no immediate connection with the behavior of any individual or group of individuals. What natural disasters certainly do, though, is through great pain remind us of the uncertainties of life. God does not see fit to answer all our questions at this time.

Comments: *Have you ever had to trust someone's motives when their actions seem to contradict them?* (My tinker toy example)

## Chapter 8 - Systemic Suffering

Our author quotes Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: "Unlimited power in the hands of limited people always leads to cruelty". This is suffering clearly created by humans. I'm not going to ask a question of you here...we have already discussed undeserved suffering, and our church seems to have a start in understanding the need to oppose systemic suffering.

## Chapter 9 - The Suffering Servant

Jesus suffered. A lot. And it was for us—in the midst of not having all the information about his suffering. In the garden the night before he was crucified he asked that he might avoid the upcoming crucifixion *if* possible. Apparently there were things about God's plans that Jesus did not know at that point. Only God knew if the cup could pass from him. And, of course, the answer was "No."

The next day on the cross he uttered the famous quote from Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Interesting that this is the *same* question we ask when suffering, and it speaks to the humanity of Jesus. That Psalm describes horrible taunting and suffering, but eventually ends on a triumphant note—the same note that will someday be true in our lives if we entrust them to God. How much Jesus was actually feeling abandoned by God, I don't know. But David, who wrote it, was for sure, and that verse *is* part of the overall psalm that Jesus referred to. In any case, on the cross Jesus was not experiencing the promised joy, and he made it through. Perhaps, though we are not experiencing our promised joy yet either, we can make it through also.

PHILLIPS New Testament — Hebrews 12:2

“Surrounded then as we are by these serried ranks (rows) of witnesses, let us strip off everything that hinders us, as well as the sin which dogs our feet, and let us run the race that we have to run with patience, our eyes fixed on Jesus the source and the goal of our faith. For he himself endured a cross and thought nothing of its shame because of the joy he knew would follow his suffering; and he is now seated at the right hand of God’s throne. *Think constantly of him enduring all that sinful men could say against him and you will not lose your purpose or your courage.*”

Comments: *What brings you courage?*

## Managing suffering skillfully

“Manage” suffering skillfully? Isn’t that a silly idea? Not really. At first we certainly don’t know how to “manage” suffering skillfully, but that’s something we can learn. At least some. :)

We’re going to look at...

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| Today:     | 1) Feeding your faith   |
| Next week: | 2) Focusing on fellowship and<br>3) Practicing good self-care and care for others |

### • **Feeding your faith**

- Study (not just read) your Bible, and check out some good, contemporary authors. Do this before any new suffering!
  - John 6:63 “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”
- Note the “three omni’s” in the Bible—God’s omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience. Also note God’s “omni-loving” and “omni-attentive” character and especially read the stories of the people in the Bible whose prayers God answered. Google “examples answered prayer bible”
- Use verses from scripture and other affirmations to remind you of life-giving beliefs (see AA slogans for a few possibilities). Put a couple where you will see them until they become an automatic part of your thinking.
- When your faith is lacking, spend time with those whose faith is stronger.
- Learn the serenity prayer...it will help you to keep from obsessing. “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” It can sound trite until you are in a situation when you simply do not know what to do, whether to keep working to changing a situation, or just stop and accept it as it is.
- Practice prayer—a *conversation* with God. ACTS = adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. Be honest with God about your complaints and your feelings.

- Utilize the Psalms
  - Pray the psalms—the full range of human emotion is there
  - There is a long history of lament in scripture—make your own wailing wall of losses and unfulfilled yearnings (really significant matters of the heart). See handout.
  - To find peace about a particularly difficult experience you may have to go to God and ask God to “speak” personally to you about it. You need to feel heard and understood by God and to experience God’s presence. It’s a relationship. You may not get an answer, but you might.
  - Memorialize losses in other ways: plant a tree or a garden, paint or buy a painting that speaks to you about a loss or write a poem and frame it. Sometimes it is best utilize something lasting and visible so that you can concretely express the lasting impact of the person or loss.
- Develop an outlook on life in which you accept periodic random suffering as a part of life that we all experience—though very unevenly at times. Don’t see yourself as singled out by God for something “bad”. Avoid bitterness and watch out for resentment and self pity. They are killers and will ruin any peace of mind you might have.
- Develop patience and a long view of life. God has given us many promises...many of which are being fulfilled *gradually*. In some ways we are in a transition time between now and eternity. The issues of timing and waiting are difficult ones.

## Homework

1. Read James 1 and Romans 8
2. Make a wailing wall? Only put things on it that really get to you
3. Email a list of favorite hymns and activities that improve your mood when you’re in a tough spot. Don’t let your classmates down! Perhaps you could do it in the next couple of days?