THE CROSS

UNDERSTANDING SUFFERING THROUGH THE CROSS

Abstract: this lesson aims to help us to understand suffering in light of the Cross. God has a purpose for human suffering – one that is filled with future glory for those who trust God – and it is our intention to know God’s purpose for our suffering in this world so that we can both glorify God and rejoice in His goodness!
INTRODUCTION

God does not diminish the reality of human suffering; He gives no easy answers. God deals with our suffering from the depths of His heart. Human suffering is central to the gospel because suffering is the result of sin, and the gospel is Christ’s good news of atonement and redemption and deliverance from sin! Human suffering both calls the unbelieving world to God and disciplines God’s beloved children so that they can partake of His holiness. Therefore the Church must understand human suffering and exercise Christ’s supernatural love to this suffering world!

Lamentations 3:31-33 “For the Lord will not cast off forever. But if He causes grief, yet He will have compassion according to the abundance of His mercies. For He does not afflict willingly, nor (willingly) grieve the sons of men.

In Hebrew, this passage literally says that God does not willingly afflict humanity from the desires of His heart!

Genesis 1:26-31 “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the livestock, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’ Then God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is on the face of all the earth and every tree which has fruit yielding seed. It shall be food for you. To every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air and to everything that creeps on the earth which has the breath of life in it, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so. God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day.”

In the beginning God created everything and made it very good. There was no sin or suffering. But in order for love to be authentic and genuine, there must be free will; we were created in perfection for a loving relationship with God and He gave us freedom from the beginning.

Genesis 2:8-9, 15-17 “The Lord God planted a garden in the east, in Eden, and there He placed the man whom He had formed. The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and to keep it. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, along with the tree of knowledge of good and evil.... And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.’"

God gave Adam everything in perfect condition and planted a tree in the garden called the tree of knowledge of good and evil. I don’t believe there was anything innately magical or mystical about this tree; it did not have dark powers to give any special forbidden knowledge. The knowledge of the difference between good and evil would come from disobeying God and pursuing our own selfish desires. Their voluntary departure from their life-giving Creator fractured humanity and brought death into the world.
Romans 5:12 “Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, so death has spread to all men, because all have sinned.”

The human race was contained in Adam and Eve – from their DNA every human being came – and when they sinned the whole human race was fractured. Just as Adam and Eve were created in the condition of perfection, so now their offspring would be born into the condition of sin.

Now God begins to teach Adam and Eve the difference between good and evil:

Genesis 3:17-19 “Cursed is the ground on account of you; in hard labor you will eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it will bring forth for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you will eat bread until you return to the ground, because out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you will return.”

God cursed the world and brought all creation into the bondage of corruption to demonstrate how opposed He is to the evils of sin:

Romans 8:18-23 “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us. The eager expectation of the creation waits for the appearance of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but by the will of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation groans and travails in pain together until now. Not only that, but we also, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan within ourselves while eagerly waiting for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.”

God is unwilling to allow sin to go unpunished and live in complete happiness! Instead, He deals mercifully with fallen humanity to bring hope and redemption to those who love Him and want to be with Him. Therefore, God does not bring Christians out of suffering in this life, He calls them into the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings and sends them out into a suffering world to proclaim and demonstrate the love and kindness of Christ who endured worldly suffering for the sake of humanity so that we might be saved through God’s grace!

1 Peter 1:6-9 “In this you greatly rejoice, even though now, if for a little while, you have had to suffer various trials, in order that the genuineness of your faith, which is more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tried by fire, may be found to the result in praise and glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom, having not seen, you love; and in whom, though you do not see Him now, you believe and you rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory, receiving as the result of your faith the salvation of your souls.”
UNDERSTANDING SUFFERING THROUGH THE CROSS

Anything I say about human suffering will come short of fully conveying the deep pain we experience as we go through the many trials of this world. So please forgive me as I grapple with speaking on such a raw and tender subject as human suffering.

When we talk about human suffering we are talking about both natural and moral evils; earthquakes, hurricanes, famines and starvations, droughts, diseases of all kinds, along with wars, injustice, betrayal, murder, abandonment, lying accusations, rape, and all kinds of moral wrongs. The whole world is constantly afflicted by every kind of suffering.

But human suffering is not random, nor is it blind and without purpose.

Story about a little girl with congenital insensitivity to pain with anhidrosis (or CIPA).

Do you notice that the question, “why is there suffering”, is almost never asked of atheists? It is a distinctly theistic question; suffering makes us question God! In a world where sin existed but there was no suffering we would never turn our attention to God and repent of our sins; humanity would be lost from God forever.

Suffering makes us ask “why”. It constantly reminds us that something is not right. That’s why so much of the human experience centers around trying to relieve suffering! We intuitively know that suffering is not natural (remember, suffering is not “natural” because God did not create humanity in a state of suffering – that was a modification after our natural condition).

The severity of human suffering demonstrates the extreme hardness of the human heart. But suffering has the unique capacity to soften the hard human heart and remind us of our need for compassion. Where prosperity and success has the tendency to cause us to become more selfish and insensitive, suffering humbles us and causes us to seek and show compassion.

Suffering appeals for three things:

1. Corresponding feeling (where hope is seen)
2. Fellowship (where comfort is experienced)
3. Counsel (where comfort is understood)

It is on the cross of Jesus Christ where human suffering is satisfied in all three points.

On the cross we find our God who has felt and experienced the pain and suffering that we feel; on the cross we find fellowship with our God who came to us so that we could come to Him; and on the cross we find the wisdom of God that comforts us with the way of life!
Our desire for corresponding feeling discovers a genuine and understanding companion upon the cross:

**Hebrews 4:15-16** “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who was in every sense tempted like we are, yet without sin. Let us then come with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

**Isaiah 53:3-9** “He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our grief and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and by his stripes we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way, but the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; He was brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearsers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away, and who shall declare his generation? For he was cut off out of the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was struck. His grave was assigned with the wicked, yet with the rich in his death, because he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.”

And on the cross we find the comfort of fellowship that we crave as we endure the trials of this world:

**Luke 9:23** “Then He said to them all, ‘If anyone will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.’”

**Philippians 3:7-11** “But what things were gain to me, I have counted these things to be loss for the sake of Christ. Yes, certainly, I count everything as loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have forfeited the loss of all things and count them as rubbish that I may gain Christ, and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness which is from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is of God on the basis of faith, to know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if somehow I might make it to the resurrection of the dead!”

**Hebrews 12:2** “Let us look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

And on the cross we come to understand the comfort of God’s wisdom that will guide us through our sufferings:

**1st Corinthians 2:2, 13-14** “For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. These things also we proclaim, not in the words which man’s wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”
Upon the cross we come to know and to believe the love that God has for us (see 1 John 4:9, 16); we discover His compassionate love, and enter into the fellowship with our Creator for which we were made; through the message of the cross we receive the counsel of God that is life to our souls.

THE WRATH OF GOD ON THE CROSS

But the Scripture says to consider both the goodness and severity of God (Romans 11:22): THE WRATH OF GOD.

John 3:36 “He who believes in the Son has eternal life. He who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”

The wrath of God is separation from Him and all that He is: no love, no comfort, no mercy, no righteousness, no goodness, no joy, no peace, etc. The suffering the world is experiencing now will only be multiplied by the severity of eternal separation from God that will be finalized on judgment day.

Romans 1:18, 24 “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth through unrighteousness... Therefore God gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their hearts...”

Ravi Zacharias put it best when he said that when man refuses to bend their knee to God and say 'Your will be done', God says to them, 'Alright, you will be done’. God hands us over to the wickedness of our own designs upon this earth!

But there is more to the wrath of God than simply the evil designs of mankind; there is punishment!

Matthew 3:12 “His fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean His floor and gather His wheat into the granary, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Jeremiah 4:4 “Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, and take away the foreskins of your heart... lest My fury come forth like fire, and burn so that no one can quench it, because of the evil of your deeds.”

1 Thessalonians 1:10 “...Jesus, who delivered us from the wrath to come.”

Colossians 3:5-6 “Therefore put to death the parts of your earthly nature: sexual immorality, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.”

Upon the cross we see how much God hates the sin that has brought so much affliction upon the world; and we see His righteous condemnation of sin! The cross is both God’s testimony of love to the world, and His warning of the wrath to come!
THE SACRIFICE OF CHRIST THAT DELIVERS YOU FROM WRATH

1 Peter 2:21-24 “For to this you were called, because Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: ‘He committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth.’ When He was reviled, He did not revile back; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but He entrusted Himself to Him who judges righteously. He Himself bore our sins in His own body on the [cross], that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness. ‘By His wounds you were healed.’”

We must see upon the cross what we deserved; the wrath that was owed us was placed upon Him!

Galatians 3:13 “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law by being made a curse for us… so that the blessing (promised to) Abraham might come upon the Gentiles through Jesus Christ, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.”

(see Matthew 27:46) “About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani’, which means, ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’”

The curse of separation from God fell upon Jesus Christ! For the brief time upon the cross, Jesus’ perfect union with God was broken! This is fully beyond human understanding; how can God be separated from God? But for a moment in time, all that is the union of the Trinity-God was temporarily fractured as Jesus was forsaken upon the cross.

Therefore, Jesus understands the greatest grief possible: to be totally forsaken by God. There is nothing worse in existence than to be forsaken by God; Jesus endured this upon the cross!

2nd Corinthians 5:21 “God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

Isaiah 53:10 “Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. If He made Himself as an offering for sin, He shall see His offspring, He shall prolong His days, and the good pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in His hand.”

THE PURPOSE OF THE SUFFERING CROSS

We said in the beginning that human suffering is not purposeless. What a shame that so many people in the world today believe the lie that their suffering is meaningless!

Romans 6:3-6 “Do you not know that we who were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him by baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in the likeness of His death, so shall we also be united with Him in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man has been crucified with Him, so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we should no longer be slaves to sin.”
1st Peter 4:1-2 “Therefore, since Christ has suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh serving human desires, but the will of God.”

Suffering is meant by God to call to attention the lost and purify those who believe.

Hebrews 12:7-11 “Endure discipline; God is dealing with you as with sons. For what son is there whom a father does not discipline? If you are without discipline, of which everyone has partaken, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers, and they corrected us, and we gave them reverence. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed disciplined us for a short time according to their own judgment, but He does so for our profit, that we may partake of His holiness. Now no discipline seems to be joyful at the time, but grievous. Yet afterward it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness in those who have been trained by it.”

CONCLUSIONS

Matthew 10:29-31 “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Therefore, do not fear. You are more valuable than many sparrows.

God is not unaware of your suffering. Not only does He see your suffering, but He personally came and took upon Himself the burdens of human suffering in a demonstration of love and righteousness that far exceeds even our greatest expectations! Truly, many people hear this gospel and cannot believe that God would do all this for us; but that is how perfect and righteous our God truly is!

Job 6:2 “Oh that my grief were fully weighed and my calamity laid with it on the scales!

When your heart lifts up and declares with Job, “on that my grief were fully weighed”, know that God has fully weighed your grief. He has looked into your heart where no other mortal can look, and seen the suffering you are enduring there. He has looked upon your broken body and see the affliction you feel. And more than just looking upon your sorrow, He has taken it upon Himself!

This is God’s promise to you, that if you can see your sin in departing from the goodness of God, and confess this sin, demonstrating your trust in God by being baptized in His name, then He will come and make His home in your heart so that you can know your heavenly Father!