Suffering and the Sovereignty of God

R.C. Sproul Jr.
MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

The life of a Christian is often characterized by happiness and abundance. God loves to lavish good gifts upon His children, and those who know Him are reminded of His love and faithfulness when they experience His gracious blessings. However, there are other times in the Christian life when believers find themselves to be in a desolate wasteland of hardship and when God may appear to be distant. In this message, Dr. R.C. Sproul Jr. introduces the topic of suffering, examining important truths and sharing some of his personal journeys through this spiritual wasteland.

SCRIPTURE READINGS


TEACHING OBJECTIVES

1. To introduce the topic of suffering in the Christian life.
2. To describe the Devil’s attempts to undermine our relationship with God.
3. To recount some of Dr. Sproul’s recent experiences of sorrow.
4. To encourage Christians to fix their eyes upon Jesus Christ and draw near to Him in times of both joy and sorrow.

QUOTATION

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,  
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply;  
The flame shall not harm thee; I only design  
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.

–Unknown Author,  
“How Firm a Foundation”
LECTURE OUTLINE

I. A Clear Mind
   a. Though it is common to think of the Devil as having an unconquerable fear of the Word of God, this is not the case.
      i. Cunning and crafty, the Devil is eager to distort God’s words and to obscure their true significance.
      ii. The Devil is pleased when Christians misuse and misunderstand Scripture instead of thinking through issues biblically.
   b. In difficult times, we may experience a strong temptation to distance ourselves from God’s words.
      i. Rather than seek the counsel of Scripture, we may be inclined simply to emote.
      ii. If we disengage our minds and allow our hearts to drive our actions, we become spiritually vulnerable.
   c. Especially in times of suffering, it is important to meditate upon God’s Word with a clear mind.

II. An Engaged Heart
   a. When we devote our minds to the study of Scripture, the Devil will seek to use that as an opportunity to undermine God’s lordship.
      i. When we engage the Bible intellectually, there is a danger of reducing God to being merely an object of study, like an amoeba.
      ii. When theology becomes a merely academic exercise, we tend to seal God off from other areas of our lives.
   b. A clear mind must be accompanied by an engaged heart.

III. A Story of Suffering
   a. Within the year before this message was recorded, Dr. Sproul experienced the loss of his wife, Denise, and his daughter Shannon.
      i. In early 2011, after having survived cancer twice, Denise was diagnosed with leukemia.
      ii. As a young child, Shannon was diagnosed with lissencephaly, a condition which limited her mental capacity to that of a toddler.
      iii. After battling leukemia for nine months, Denise went to be with the Lord in December of 2011.
      iv. In October of 2012, Shannon followed her mother into the presence of God.
   b. Each death was both expected and unexpected.
      i. Though the family had nine months after Denise’s diagnosis to prepare for her death, the initial diagnosis came as a surprise.
      ii. Though the family knew that Shannon could die at any time, the specific timing of her death came as a surprise.
   c. Dr. Sproul found that God was present with his family in the valley of the shadow of death, even when he felt like he was alone.
IV. The God of the Living
   a. When asked a question about the resurrection by Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection, Jesus taught decisively in favor of the doctrine of the resurrection.
   b. On this occasion, Jesus proclaimed that God is not the God of the dead, but of the living (Luke 20:38).
      i. Since God is the God of Denise and Shannon Sproul, they live.  
      ii. He was present with them during their lives on this earth, and they are in His presence now.
   c. As we seek to understand the relationship between God’s almighty power and the hardship that we experience in a fallen world, we can do nothing better than fix our eyes upon God and draw closer to Him.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. The Bible teaches that the Devil fears God’s words and flees from them.
   a. True
   b. False

2. Dr. Sproul mentioned that one of the dangers of not bringing Scripture to bear on difficult situations in life is that ______________.
   a. Christians will not be able to comfort others
   b. People will rely on their emotions, not God, for guidance
   c. These situations will undermine a believer’s faith
   d. Christians will forget what the Bible says

3. Dr. Sproul warned that, in our study of God’s Word, the Devil most wants us to ______________.
   a. Misuse Scripture to justify sinful behavior
   b. Embrace bad theology
   c. Become arrogant because of our knowledge
   d. Reduce God to a mere field of study

4. When questioned by the Jewish religious leaders, Jesus clearly affirmed that those who die are raised to new life.
   a. True
   b. False

5. At the end of this message, Dr. Sproul commended ______________ when we try to reconcile God’s sovereignty with the reality of life’s hardships.
   a. An attitude of skepticism
   b. Drawing near to God
   c. Blind faith
   d. Providing a rationale for God’s actions
BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Scripture exhorts us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30). Which of these is easiest for you, and which is the most difficult?

2. Why is it crucial for one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength to be part of our relationship with God? How might the Devil try to undermine each of these areas?

3. Think of a time of difficulty or suffering that you have experienced. What was interaction with God like during that time? How has that experience influenced your relationship with God?

4. What does it mean to say that God is sovereign? Do you find tension between God’s sovereignty and the reality of sorrow and suffering in the world? Explain your answer.
MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

For many believers and non-believers alike, the so-called “problem of evil” calls the goodness and sovereignty of God into question. In order to defend God’s power and holiness, many Christians go to great lengths to distance God from the suffering and calamity that take place in the world. In this message, Dr. Sproul explores common ways of distancing God from life’s hardships. Additionally, he also points out the danger of inadvertently trying to conceal God’s sovereign work when He wishes it to be displayed openly.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Isaiah 45:1-7; Jeremiah 18:3-6; Romans 9:20-21

TEACHING OBJECTIVES

1. To describe common attempts to distance God from human suffering.
2. To recover a biblical perspective of God’s role in human affairs.
3. To remind Christians that God is the potter and we are clay in His hand.

QUOTATION

Nothing in all the vast universe can come to pass otherwise than God has eternally purposed. Here is a foundation of faith. Here is a resting place for the intellect. Here is an anchor for the soul, both sure and steadfast. It is not blind fate, unbridled evil, man or Devil, but the Lord Almighty who is ruling the world, ruling it according to His own good pleasure and for His own eternal glory.

–A.W. Pink
LECTURE OUTLINE

I. No Part in Suffering
   a. When discussing God’s sovereignty and human suffering, Christians are eager to protect and affirm the goodness of God.
      i. The effort to defend God against the charge of guilt is known as theodicy.
      ii. Though theodicy takes many forms, some common views of God’s role in suffering are unscriptural and unhelpful.
   b. One common approach is to say that God has nothing to do with human suffering.
      i. After a devastating hurricane, a prominent Christian figure claimed that God had nothing to do with that hurricane.
      ii. Later, when a hurricane veered away from his city, this figure claimed that God had answered his prayers for the city’s deliverance.
   c. This view of sovereignty is inconsistent with a biblical view of providence and actually limits God’s sovereignty.

II. The Best Possible World
   a. Another common approach to divine sovereignty and human suffering is to say that, though there is hardship and suffering in life, God made the best world He could.
   b. For example, one who holds this view might say that a world in which planes occasionally crash is better than a world without gravity.
   c. However, one might argue that the cartoon world in which bad guys fall down but good guys walk on air is better still.
   d. God, being all-knowing and all powerful, was not working under a set of limitations or constraints when He created the world.

III. Ashamed of What God is Proud Of
   a. Where theodicies tend to go wrong is in their attempt to cover up what God wishes to display.
      i. God is not ashamed of His role in history, but proud of it.
      ii. When we try to protect God’s reputation, we risk damaging it.
   b. In Scripture, God openly declares and celebrates His active role in human affairs.
      i. God declares, “I make peace and create calamity” (Isaiah 45:7).
      ii. God orchestrates human circumstances in order to demonstrate His glory and bring about His sovereign purposes.
   c. Understandably, we often struggle to imagine why God brings about things like war, natural disaster, disease, poverty, and divorce.
      i. The fact that we do not understand God’s actions does not mean that there is no reason for them.
      ii. Each day we rely upon many things that we may not understand, such as electrical systems and car engines.
      iii. The trustworthiness of a person or thing does not depend on our ability to understand or explain it.
d. The biblical metaphor of a potter and clay reminds us that God does not need to give us an account of His actions (Jeremiah 18:3-6; Romans 9:20-21).

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Theodicy is ______________.
   a. An argument for the existence of God
   b. An argument against the existence of God
   c. An attempt to clear God from an accusation of wrongdoing
   d. An ancient poem blaming Greek gods for human suffering

2. One of the most common Christian responses to calamity and suffering is to say that God had nothing to do with it.
   a. True
   b. False

3. The “best possible world” argument claims that ______________.
   a. The best response to evil is to try to make the world a better place
   b. The current state of things is more preferable than any alternative
   c. There is nothing wrong with the world
   d. Suffering is merely an illusion

4. Dr. Sproul suggests that many theodicies attempt to display what God wishes to conceal.
   a. True
   b. False

5. How does God describe His relationship with calamity in Isaiah 45:7?
   a. He makes it clear that He does not cause any human suffering.
   b. He declares that all calamity and destruction is of human origin.
   c. He states that He is the source of well-being and calamity.
   d. He says that, to respect human free will, He permits calamities.

BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the ways that you have seen Christians address God’s role in suffering? How do you tend to think of God’s sovereignty as it relates to this issue?

2. What is the appeal in saying that God does not have anything to do with human suffering? Why is this viewpoint problematic?

3. Why do we make an effort to defend God’s name and reputation? In what ways do we run the risk of damaging God’s reputation when we attempt to protect it?

4. Read Isaiah 45:7. What does God tell us about Himself in this verse? How do you respond to this claim as it relates to suffering?
Better than I Deserve

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

We are much better at finding areas of sin in the lives of others than we are at identifying our own sins. Jesus spoke wisely when he urged us to remove the plank from our own eye before attempting to extract a speck from someone else’s eye. Because we are so often blind to our own sin, we rarely acknowledge the depth of our guilt before our holy God or the profound nature of the grace He extends to us. In this message, we will reassess common assumptions about human nature in the effort to recover a biblical understanding of what we truly deserve from God.

SCRIPTURE READING


TEACHING OBJECTIVES

1. To question the assumptions behind the so-called “problem of pain.”
2. To promote a biblical understanding of what our sin really deserves.
3. To encourage Christians to recognize God’s grace during difficult times.

QUOTATION

There’s a wideness in God’s mercy
Like the wideness of the sea;
There’s a kindness in his justice
Which is more than liberty.

–Frederick Faber,
“There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy”
LECTURE OUTLINE

I. The Problem of Pleasure
   a. When the problem of evil is presented, the underlying presupposition is usually that if God has the power to stop human suffering but doesn’t, then He must not be good.
   b. However, this presupposition needs to be closely examined.
      i. This argument assumes that human beings are fundamentally good.
      ii. As John Gerstner articulated, because of the sinful nature of humanity, the real problem is not why God permits human pain, but why God permits human pleasure.
   c. When Jesus was told that a tragedy had taken place, He responded by addressing the assumptions of His listeners (Luke 13:1-5).
      i. The victims of the disaster were not worse sinners than others.
      ii. Rather, those who did not suffer were just as sinful as those who did suffer.
      iii. Instead of pointing out exceptional sin, this disaster ought to serve as a warning to all to repent of their sins.
   d. When we understand who we are in relationship to God, we begin to understand what we truly deserve.
      i. God is holy, but we are utterly sinful.
      ii. Ever since Adam and Eve rebelled against God’s rule, humanity has lived under God’s just death sentence.

II. What We Deserve and What We Receive
   a. We tend to have an inflated view of both what we deserve and what our areas of hardship are.
      i. On one occasion, Dr. Sproul was speaking with a young woman who was having difficulty in college.
      ii. Believing everyone to be against her, this woman claimed that her life was a living hell.
      iii. Dr. Sproul attempted to explain that she was actually living both in the lap of luxury and in the gracious hand of God.
   b. What we experience is actually much better than what we deserve.
      i. In this life, no one receives justice (what our sinfulness deserves) or injustice (treatment worse than what we deserve) from the hand of God.
      ii. Everyone receives non-justice (undeserved kindness) from God.
   c. The best response to tragedy is neither rage nor stoicism.
      i. Anger, even directed at a situation, is really aimed at God, who brought about the situation.
      ii. Rather than bury one’s emotions, it is appropriate to feel sadness in response to the harsh realities of a fallen world.
      iii. Because God shows grace to us in all circumstances by treating us better than we deserve, we have reason to experience gratitude in the midst of all circumstances.
STUDY QUESTIONS

1. The underlying assumption behind the problem of pain is ______________.
   a. “If God were truly omnipotent and good, He would end suffering”
   b. “The best possible world cannot exist without some pain”
   c. “If humans do not try to alleviate suffering, they deserve to suffer”
   d. “Any suffering that does not kill you will make you stronger”

2. John Gerstner taught that the reality of human pleasure presents a greater theological conundrum than the existence of human pain.
   a. True
   b. False

3. In Luke 13, Jesus responded to a tragic event by teaching that ______________.
   a. God spares those He loves from having to suffer
   b. All need to repent of their sins, whether they suffer or not
   c. Those who sin more will be punished more severely
   d. Spiritual maturity comes through suffering and self-denial

4. Every human being receives ____________ from the hand of God.
   a. Justice
   b. Injustice
   c. Indifference
   d. Non-justice

5. Because God is sovereign over our circumstances, both anger and sadness are acts of defiance against His lordship.
   a. True

B. FALSE BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference between the problem of pain and the problem of pleasure? How do Dr. Sproul’s words challenge our commonly-held assumptions?

2. Imagine that a close friend of yours has been going through a difficult time and has been told by several people that this suffering is punishment for sin. Your friend is confused and wants to know what you think. What would you say?

3. Have you ever expressed anger or frustration at a situation? Is it right or wrong to feel this way? How does God’s sovereignty relate to this situation?

4. In what ways has God given you things that you do not deserve? Conversely, how has He not given you things that you do deserve?
MESSAGE INTRODUCTION
Many of the questions that we raise about God’s sovereignty over human suffering find their answers in the book of Job. Though Job was a godly and faithful man, he suffered to such a degree that that his name is forever associated with affliction and hardship. In this message, Dr. Sproul discusses several highlights of Job’s story in order to help us begin to recover a biblical understanding of the reason for human suffering.

SCRIPTURE READINGS
Job 1:1-2:10, 42:1-17

TEACHING OBJECTIVES
1. To identify important spiritual insights in the story of Job.
2. To describe the relationship between suffering, sin, and Satan.
3. To exhort Christians to draw near to God and seek His glory in suffering.

QUOTATION
It is a matter of wonder that God should give Satan such a permission as this, should “deliver the soul of his turtle-dove” into the hand of the adversary, such a lamb to such a lion; but he did it for his own glory, the honour of Job, the explanation of Providence, and the encouragement of his afflicted people in all ages.

–Matthew Henry
LECTURE OUTLINE

I. Job's Afflictions
      i. When they think of the book of Job, suffering is usually the predominant
         theme that comes to mind.
      ii. When Christians see a person who is in the midst of severe suffering or
         hardship, they often compare that person to Job.
   b. Job's suffering had supernatural origins.
      i. On one occasion when Satan entered God's heavenly assembly, God drew
         Satan's attention to Job's faithfulness to Him.
      ii. After Satan claimed that Job's faithfulness was rooted only in his mate-
          rial prosperity, God gave Satan permission to take away Job's wealth and
          offspring.
      iii. Even when God allowed Satan to afflict Job with painful boils, Job did not
           curse God.

II. Suffering and the Devil
   a. In our efforts to distance God from suffering, we sometimes embrace the ancient
      heresy of Manichaeism.
      i. Manichaean theology taught the existence of two deities that were
         equally ultimate.
      ii. One deity was morally good, the other was morally evil, and both were
         equal in power.
   b. In our eagerness to attribute all suffering, hardship, or illness to the Devil, we may
      tend to portray him as an evil god, a wicked counterpart to the God of the Bible.
   c. However, the book of Job reminds us that the Devil is not God's equal.
      i. Rather than being omnipresent like God, Satan's movement is described
         in finite human terms, such as “going to and fro on the earth” and “walk-
         ing up and down on it.”
      ii. Significantly, Satan can only afflict Job with God's permission and within
         the boundaries God had set.

III. Suffering and Sin
   a. In his anguish, Job was joined by friends who were less than helpful.
   b. Job's friends understood that God graciously gives sinful human beings less suffer-
      ing than they deserve.
   c. However, Job’s friends remained mistakenly convinced that there was a consistent
      relationship between the depth of a person's sin and the degree of suffering that
      person would experience.
      i. Yet, many who sin greatly will suffer little in this life.
      ii. Similarly, some who sin less will suffer intensely in this life.

IV. Suffering and God's Glory
a. The reason that Job suffered was not as punishment for sin, but so that God would be glorified in the circumstances of Job’s life.
   i. God had made a wager with Satan that Job would remain faithful to Him in the midst of suffering and affliction.
   ii. When Job trusted God in the time of trial, God was glorified.
b. Job’s story did not end the same way that Noah’s story ended.
   i. After the flood, God promised Noah that He would never again destroy the world through a flood.
   ii. However, at the end of Job, God did not promise that His faithful followers would never again be tested through suffering.
c. We should not be surprised if God calls upon us to bring glory to Him through suffering.
d. Though it does not come naturally to us, the right attitude to have in difficult times is an eagerness to make God’s glory known.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. The suffering that Satan inflicted upon Job was greater than what God had permitted.
   a. True.
   b. False.

2. What does Manichean theology teach about God’s relationship to evil?
   a. Good and evil express different aspects of God’s character.
   b. Good and evil are determined by the needs of the individual.
   c. A cosmic struggle exists between ultimate good and evil deities.
   d. God will ensure that good will triumph over evil in the end.

3. How does the book of Job describe the Devil’s role in human suffering?
   a. He is in many places at once, doing as much harm as he can.
   b. He is God’s agent for punishing people according to their sins.
   c. He brings about all the suffering in the world.
   d. He cannot harm God’s people without God’s permission.

4. Job’s friends tried unsuccessfully to convince Job that his suffering was not his fault.
   a. True
   b. False

5. The primary purpose of Job’s suffering was ____________.
   a. To punish Job for his sins
   b. To bring glory to God
   c. To warn his friends about God’s coming judgment
   d. To keep Job from taking God’s blessings for granted
BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What can the story of Job teach us about God's sovereignty? What does it teach us about the nature of suffering?

2. How did Job's friends fail to console him? How would you respond to someone in Job's situation?

3. How would you describe the difference between the end of Noah's story and the end of Job's story? Why is this significant? What does this mean for our lives today?

4. In what ways have you seen God bring glory to Himself through suffering in your life or in the life of someone you know?
MESSAGE INTRODUCTION
It can be dangerously easy to jump to conclusions about people around us who are suffering. Whether someone is destitute, ill, homeless, or alone, our first inclination might be to wonder how they managed to get themselves into their current predicament or what sin they committed to be punished in this way. However, as we see in John 9:1-7, Jesus shatters our assumptions with the truth that, even in the midst of affliction and sorrow, God is at work to bring honor to Himself in the lives of those who suffer.

SCRIPTURE READING
John 9:1-7

TEACHING OBJECTIVES
1. To show how Jesus responded to assumptions about sin and suffering.
2. To affirm God’s desire to achieve His purposes through suffering.
3. To encourage Christians to pursue God’s glory in all circumstances.

QUOTATION
We must take heed of judging any to be great sinners merely because they are great sufferers; [...] they are sometimes intended purely for the glory of God and the manifesting of his works.

–Matthew Henry
LECTURE OUTLINE

I. The Patience of Jesus
a. Though Job’s patience is universally recognized, even he did not demonstrate the degree of patience that Jesus Christ displayed.

b. In addition to dealing with the interference of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus also had to put up with aggravating behavior from His disciples.

c. One day when Jesus and His disciples saw a blind man, the disciples asked Him whether this man’s blindness was the result of his own sin or the sins of his parents.
   i. This question must have tried Jesus’ patience.
   ii. In spite of their familiarity with the Old Testament, the disciples did not apply the lessons of the book of Job to this situation.

d. Rather than express frustration with His disciples, Jesus answered them patiently and pastorally: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.”

II. The Nagging Question of Guilt
a. When the Devil is not tempting us to sin, he may be attempting to paralyze us with guilt.
   i. The name “Satan” is derived from a word meaning “accuser.”
   ii. In times of uncertainty or of dark providence, the Devil will try to convince us that God is punishing us for our sins, and so drive us to despair.

b. The blind man would have been eager to hear Jesus’ response to the disciples’ question.
   i. It is possible that he had been asking himself the same question all his life, wondering for whose sin he was being punished.
   ii. It is also possible that he knew that he did not bring blindness upon himself and was eager to find vindication amidst the stinging accusations of others.

c. In either case, it must have been a delight to hear Jesus publicly declare that he was not suffering because of anyone’s sin.

III. Jesus’ Flannelgraphs
a. After answering the disciples’ question, Jesus made some clay with his saliva, placed it on the blind man’s eyes, and instructed him to wash in the pool of Siloam.

b. After he was healed, this man may have marveled at Jesus’ statement about the purpose of his blindness.

c. The reason he had been blind his whole life was so that he could be Jesus’ flannelgraph.
   i. Flannelgraphs, which use flannel characters to enact stories, have been a favorite audiovisual aid of Sunday school teachers and Christian educators for generations.
   ii. Similarly, the blind man was a living visual aid that demonstrated Jesus’ power and authority.
iii. This man had lived his entire life blind so that Jesus could show that He is the light of the world.
d. In the same way, we are Jesus' flannelgraphs.
   i. Though it may sound demeaning to identify a person as a visual aid, it is a privilege to show God's glory to others.
   ii. When we experience times of trial and suffering, we can take joy in the fact that it is not meaningless, but instead is an opportunity for God to be glorified.

STUDY QUESTIONS
1. What did the disciples ask about the blind man?
   a. They asked how this man had become blind.
   b. They asked Jesus to heal the blind man.
   c. They asked why God would permit an innocent person to suffer.
   d. They asked who had committed the sin that led to his blindness.
2. The question that the disciples asked Jesus demonstrated a clear understanding of the story of Job.
   a. True
   b. False
3. Satan's name means __________.
   a. “Accuser”
   b. “Evil One”
   c. “Tempter”
   d. “Enemy”
4. After seeing the blind man's display of faith, Jesus sent him to wash in the pool of Siloam.
   a. True
   b. False
5. In what way is the blind man in this story similar to a flannelgraph?
   a. The blind man told other people about Jesus.
   b. According to church tradition, this man often wore flannel shirts.
   c. He was used to show others who Jesus was.
   d. Jesus sovereignly controlled him like a flannelgraph character.

BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
1. How did Jesus demonstrate patience during His earthly ministry? In what ways has God's patience been shown in your life?
2. Why is the story of Job similar to the story of the man who was born blind? What is the result of their suffering?

3. What are some common assumptions that we may hold about people who experience poverty, homelessness, disease, and other forms of suffering? How do Jesus’ words and actions in John 9:1-7 address these attitudes of our hearts?

4. In light of John 9:1-7, what should our mindset be when we are in times of trial and suffering?
MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

When we find ourselves in trying circumstances, we often cry out to God for deliverance. Yet, these prayers at times appear to remain unanswered, and our suffering may continue unabated. Rather than giving in to despair in these situations, the apostle Paul urged believers to behold God's grace at work amidst life's most daunting situations. As Paul discovered, such trials are often God's mysterious means of achieving His wondrous purposes in us.

SCRIPTURE READING

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

TEACHING OBJECTIVES

1. To explain Paul's teaching about his thorn in the flesh in 2 Corinthians 12.
2. To identify some of the spiritual dangers in Paul's experiences and ours.
3. To describe ways that God uses hardship to protect us from ourselves.
4. To promote a greater awareness of God's love and grace in suffering.

QUOTATION

*The thorn on the rose-bush is the purposed friend and not the enemy of the rose. The flower is all the more surely perfected because the thorn remains. And so it is with the thorns of the soul. By the very retention of the thorn, faith is nourished and ordered power and the faculty to apprehend the glory of God when He is pleased to reveal it. And thus are we led to the all-sufficiency of the grace of the Father in the Heaven.*

–John Henry Jowett
LECTURE OUTLINE

I. Paul’s Need for a Thorn
   a. A frequent topic of speculation among theologians is the nature of Paul’s “thorn in the flesh.”
      i. “And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure” (2 Corinthians 12:7).
      ii. Though we cannot be sure what this thorn was, Dr. Sproul suspects that it was kidney stones.
   b. Although Paul did not disclose the details of this affliction, he clearly explained why he suffered from it.
      i. Paul understood that God was the ultimate source of the thorn.
      ii. Paul understood that this thorn had been given to him for his own spiritual well-being.
   c. Paul needed to be humbled by this thorn because he had many reasons to become proud.
      i. Paul was an intellectual giant among his peers.
      ii. Paul possessed extensive knowledge of God’s Word.
      iii. Paul repeatedly demonstrated courage and strength of resolve.
      iv. Consequently, Paul would have been vulnerable to the temptation of pride.

II. God’s Love through Trials and Thorns
   a. God’s passion for Paul was that Paul would grow in grace and wisdom.
      i. When we experience spiritual victories, the devil desires us to celebrate those victories and let our spiritual guard down.
      ii. If we stop to congratulate ourselves after victory, we invite defeat.
      iii. To suppose that Paul did not need to be continually cleansed from sin is to underestimate both God’s holiness and human depravity.
      iv. Paul needed to understand his need for God not just with his mind, but with the very core of his being.
   b. God creates calamity in order to help us become more like Jesus.
      i. God is more interested in our becoming holy than in our being happy.
      ii. Dr. Sproul came to understand that his daughter Shannon’s affliction was one of God’s sanctifying gifts to the Sproul family.
      iii. They were not there to help and teach her; rather, she was there to help and teach them.
   c. The defining quality of God’s grace is that God offers everything to those who can offer Him nothing.
      i. Our relationship with God is not a partnership or an exchange.
      ii. We cannot give anything to God that He doesn’t already have.
III. The Glorious Goal

a. The greatest thing that can ever happen to us is that we become like Jesus.
   i. This is the purpose for which God called us to faith in Christ.
   ii. This ought to be our consuming passion.

b. Yet, in our sin, we place other priorities and idols above this goal.
   i. When our hearts crave peace, comfort, wealth, and influence, we fall short of what we were made for.
   ii. By God’s grace, He uses suffering to draw us to Jesus and make us like Him.

c. If we truly desire to become like Christ, we can expect God to send suffering and calamity into our lives.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Who was/were the source of Paul’s thorn in the flesh?
   a. The false teachers in Corinth
   b. The Jewish religious leaders
   c. God
   d. Satan

2. According to 2 Corinthians 12, Paul’s thorn in the flesh was a major obstacle to his faith.
   a. True
   b. False

3. As stated in this message, God most desires us to be __________.
   a. Happy
   b. Theologically trained
   c. Holy
   d. Effective in ministry

4. All of the following statements about our relationship with God are true except __________.
   a. God offers everything to those who can offer Him nothing
   b. God calls to discipleship those who are best equipped to serve Him
   c. Humans cannot give God anything that He does not already have
   d. Equal partnership between God and people is not possible

5. According to Dr. Sproul, the greatest thing that could ever happen to human beings is that they will go to heaven when they die.
   a. True
   b. False
BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the reasons why Paul might have grown spiritually proud? In what ways does pride tempt you?

2. How might the Devil attempt to use even our spiritual victories to draw us away from God?

3. Dr. Sproul referred to his daughter Shannon as his “spiritual better.” What does this mean? What people has God placed in your life as your “spiritual betters?”

4. What would you describe as your own personal thorn in the flesh? How has God used this thorn to change you?
Living with the Mystery

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

Even when we believe God's promise that He uses trial and hardship to accomplish great things, we may not be quite satisfied. Often we think that suffering would be easier to endure if we had access to God's master plan and could know in advance exactly what He was going to accomplish through our ordeals. Though God may at times impart an understanding of these things, this is not the norm. More often than not, He calls us to live amidst the ambiguity and mystery of knowing that He is at work without knowing exactly what He is doing. In such times, we have the assurance that Christ, who beckons us to suffer in His name, will not leave or forsake us.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Job 38: 4-11; Romans 11:33-36; Romans 8:31-39

TEACHING OBJECTIVES

1. To describe the human tendency to seek unknowable knowledge of God.
2. To identify what we can and cannot know about why we suffer.
3. To remind Christians that obedience in suffering honors Christ.
4. To urge Christians to fix their eyes upon Jesus Christ in all seasons.

QUOTATION

Eighty and six years I have served him, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and Saviour?

–Polycarp of Smyrna
LECTURE OUTLINE

I. Seeking Answers
   a. In our study of sovereignty and suffering, we have examined several reasons why a person may experience suffering.
      i. Suffering is a fitting and just punishment for human sin.
      ii. Suffering brings opportunities for God to demonstrate His power and glory.
      iii. Suffering is one of the ways that God makes us more like Jesus.
   b. However, when we find ourselves in times of suffering, we do not wish to know what the reason for our suffering might be, but what the reason actually is for this specific situation.
   c. When a person recognizes that God is in control of all things, it is not uncommon for that person to begin to form conclusions about why God does what He does.
      i. Though we may think we know why God does what He does, this knowledge is ultimately beyond our reach.
      ii. Moreover, it is dangerous to suppose that we can know the mind of God.
   d. A Puritan once told the story of coming across a copy of the Book of Common Prayer which had been eaten by mice.
      i. This man, who was critical of the Book of Common Prayer, concluded that God had providentially sent a mouse to destroy the prayer book.
      ii. However, a defender of the Book of Common Prayer might have just as easily surmised that God had intended to demonstrate that even mice recognized the importance of feeding upon the prayer book.
   e. Though Christians may agree that God sovereignly directs everything, they will tend to disagree about why He directs things as He does.

II. Knowing What We Can and Cannot Know
   a. Though many things are beyond our knowledge, there are some things that God has permitted us to know.
   b. If we belong to Christ, we can be sure that God is not punishing us for our sins.
      i. Retribution seeks to even the scales of justice by giving wrongdoers the punishment that they deserve.
      ii. God does not enact retribution upon Christians because Christ has already fully atoned for their sins.
   c. If we belong to Christ, we can be sure that God is helping us to grow in grace.
      i. Rehabilitation seeks the well-being of a wrongdoer through transformation.
      ii. As a loving Father, God disciplines His children in order to put our sinful nature to death and advance our sanctification.
   d. We must be humble about what we can’t know, but we must also be willing to accept what should be obvious to us.
      i. We should not assume that God mechanically prescribes certain forms of suffering as remedies for particular sins.
      ii. Yet, there may at times be a clear connection between our sin problems and the particular hardship we may be experiencing.
III. Knowing for Whom We Suffer

a. Since we cannot always know why we suffer, it is important to remember that it is Jesus who calls us to suffer.
   i. When the elderly bishop Polycarp was ordered to recant his faith in Jesus or die a martyr’s death, he replied, “Eighty and six years I have served him, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and Saviour?”
   ii. The same Jesus who treated Polycarp graciously for over eighty years also deals graciously with us each day of our lives.

b. If we truly desire for Christ to be glorified and for us to be made like Him, we must be willing to suffer as He calls us, whatever the cost.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Dr. Sproul stated that __________ is a natural but mistaken response to the doctrine of God’s sovereignty.
   a. Denying human free will and responsibility
   b. Supralapsarianism
   c. Assuming we can know why God does what He does
   d. Intellectualism

2. Even if Christians share the belief that God sovereignly orchestrates events, they may disagree about why He brings about certain events.
   a. True
   b. False

3. The concept of retribution refers to __________.
   a. Efforts to ensure that a wrong deed will not be repeated
   b. Revenge
   c. Just punishment for wrongdoing
   d. An anger-driven response

4. It is inherently misleading to claim that there is a connection between areas of sin in our lives and the trials that we face.
   a. True
   b. False

5. The ancient bishop __________ expressed his trust in Christ by saying that, in all his life, Jesus had never done him any wrong.
   a. Ambrose
   b. Origen
   c. Ignatius
   d. Polycarp
BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is it problematic to believe that we can know the reasons behind God’s actions? What are some possible consequences of this mindset?

2. What can we know about God’s reasons for human suffering? What can’t we know? How should we live in this tension between knowing and not knowing?

3. What is the difference between retribution and rehabilitation? Under what circumstances might a person receive each of these from God?

4. In what area of your life have you most wished to know God’s master plan? How have you been shaped by being made to walk through this experience by faith instead of by sight?
MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

The term “sanctification” is a common buzzword in many Christian circles, and it is rightly associated with the teaching that Christ’s disciples are being made holy by the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. However, we must not limit ourselves to a merely abstract and cognitive understanding of this doctrine. Rather, God's Word calls us to recognize that sanctification is a present reality in our daily experiences. Whenever we encounter hardship and opposition in life, we can rest in the assurance that God's Spirit is working through it to make us more like Jesus Christ.

SCRIPTURE READING

James 1:1-4

TEACHING OBJECTIVES

1. To recover a biblical understanding of sanctification.
2. To discuss what joy is and how we can experience it during trials.
3. To remind Christians what the goal of our suffering and hardship is.
4. To exhort Christians to anticipate with joy the future that awaits them.

QUOTATION

We are told that the Captain of our salvation was made perfect through suffering, therefore we who are sinful, and who are far from being perfect, must not wonder if we are called to pass through suffering too. Shall the head be crowned with thorns, and shall the other members of the body be rocked upon the dainty lap of ease? Must Christ pass through seas of his own blood to win the crown, and are we to walk to heaven dryshod in silver slippers? No, our Master’s experience teaches us that suffering is necessary, and the true-born child of God must not, would not, escape it if he might.

–Charles Spurgeon
LECTURE OUTLINE

I. Joy in Suffering
   a. Among Christians, there is a dangerous tendency to underplay the importance of sanctification.
      i. We often think of sanctification primarily as a doctrine about growing in holiness, instead of as a present reality in our lives.
      ii. The fact that we tend to overlook our own need to be cleansed from sinfulness when we think about suffering indicates our apathy toward personal holiness.
      iii. Because we do not understand the spiritual path Christ is leading us on, we grow alarmed when He leads us through the valley of the shadow of death.
   b. James, the earthly brother of Jesus, understood and experienced Christ’s sanctifying power.
      i. Though he grew up in the same household as Jesus, James did not accept Him as the Messiah until sometime after His resurrection.
      ii. James became an influential leader within the Jerusalem church and was known for his humility, wisdom, and commitment to prayer.
   c. In his epistle, James exhorted his fellow believers, saying, “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials” (James 1:2).
      i. We sometimes understand these words simply as a command not to grumble or complain.
      ii. In our efforts to make sense of this verse, we might also substitute the more vague concept of “happiness” for true joy.
         1. A transient emotional response to favorable circumstances, happiness does not persist in the midst of trials and hardship.
         2. Joy, however, comes from our confidence in the certain hope that Christ offers to us.
         3. One can experience joy even while mourning and weeping.
   d. James explained that our joy is anchored in the knowledge that God is bringing us toward spiritual perfection: “knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (James 1:3-4).

II. Christ Formed in Us
   a. Sadly, many professing Christians are not very interested in Jesus.
      ii. Jesus at times is considered to be part of elementary Christian doctrine, easily mastered before moving on to greater theological depth.
      iii. In short, many Christians act as if Jesus is merely part of their past.
b. However, the truth is that Christ represents our past and our future.
   i. The gospel proclaims that our sins can be forgiven.
   ii. The gospel assures us that we can escape the fires of hell.
   iii. The gospel anticipates that we will spend eternity in the new heavens and the new earth.
   iv. The gospel also promises us that we shall be like Jesus in all His beauty and radiance.
   v. One day we shall be perfected in His image, and our present afflictions are working toward that glorious goal.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Dr. Sproul observed that most Christians tend to think of sanctification primarily as
   a. An obstacle to faith
   b. A present reality in their lives
   c. Something that is optional
   d. A doctrine

2. When did James become a follower of Christ?
   a. When he watched Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead
   b. Sometime after Jesus rose from the dead
   c. After Paul presented the gospel to him
   d. When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost

3. James eventually became an influential leader within the Jerusalem church, and he authored several books of the New Testament.
   a. True
   b. False

4. The vision of joy that James articulated in James 1:2-4 is rooted in
   a. The knowledge that hard work eventually brings a reward
   b. The assumption that quality of life will one day improve
   c. The certainty that God directs believers toward perfection
   d. The possibility of an end to the persecution of believers

5. The gospel of Jesus Christ promises the forgiveness of sins, the inheritance of eternal life, and transformation into the image of Jesus.
   a. True
   b. False
BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Each day of our lives contains opportunities for us to grow in grace. What specific things can you do today and this week in order to become more like Jesus?

2. What do you find most striking about James 1:1-4? How do these words from Scripture speak to a specific situation in your life right now?

3. Imagine that a Christian friend of yours sees you reading a copy of Dr. Sproul Sr.’s *The Glory of Christ*. Aware of your love for theological depth, this friend asks you why you have chosen to read about Jesus when you accepted Him as your Savior a long time ago. What would you say in response?

4. Scripture indicates that in the next life, Christians will both be transformed to be like Jesus Christ and will also retain their personal uniqueness. What does this reality teach us about God? What does it imply about us?
MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

Though the kingdom of God has been inaugurated in the Person and work of Jesus Christ, the kingdom has not yet come in all its fullness. Consequently, life in this period of “already” and “not yet” is complex and multifaceted. Though we rejoice in Christ’s victory, we continue to experience tragedy and death. While we mourn the loss of friends and loved ones, we know that, because Christ has defeated death, our sorrow will one day turn to joy.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Ecclesiastes 7:2-4; 1 Corinthians 15:20-26; 1 Thessalonians 4:13

TEACHING OBJECTIVES

1. To underscore the fact that death truly is an enemy.
2. To discuss the centrality of resurrection to the Christian worldview.
3. To celebrate all that Christians can anticipate because Christ has risen.

QUOTATION

*If then our future bodies are to retain the human form, to be easily distinguished by those who knew and loved us on earth; if they are to be endued with an unknown power; if they are to be incorruptible, immortal, and spiritual; if we are to bear the image of the heavenly, we may well bow down with humble and joyful hearts and receive the exhortation of the Apostle: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”*

–Charles Hodge
LECTURE OUTLINE

I. The Last Enemy
   a. One of the most extensive Scriptural teachings on death appears in 1 Corinthians 15:20-26, which concludes by stating, “The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.”
      i. This verse makes it clear that death is indeed an enemy.
      ii. Death entered the world through Adam’s sin, and it is a reminder of all that humanity lost in Adam’s fall.
   b. We do not do justice to the teaching of Scripture if we deny the brutal ugliness of death.
   c. Yet, Christians throughout the ages have affirmed that death has been overcome.
      i. A simple way for anthropologists to determine when Christianity spread to a particular region is to determine the age and prominence of cemeteries.
      ii. Historically, pre-Christian cultures rarely buried their dead, and cultures influenced by Christianity almost always buried their dead.
      iii. In all centuries, Christians have affirmed their belief that one day the dead in Christ will rise again.
   d. Our faith in the resurrection of the dead is possible only because Jesus has dealt a death blow to death itself.
      i. We mourn because death is an enemy which still oppresses us.
      ii. Yet, we mourn with hope because we know that death is not the end of the story.

II. Resurrection and Victory
   a. When Christians die, they experience the initial benefits of the victory Christ has won for them.
      i. The dead in Christ fully and completely see Jesus as He is.
      ii. They are completely sanctified, finally being made like Him.
      iii. They are liberated from all pain, sickness, and tears.
   b. When Christ returns, Christians will share in His complete victory and will experience the long-awaited resurrection of their bodies.
   c. Resurrection is the vindication of Jesus Christ.
      i. When Jesus was on the cross, He was declared guilty in God’s sight on our behalf.
      ii. When Jesus rose again, His innocence and righteousness were affirmed.
   d. Jesus’ resurrection marked a new beginning for the human race.
      i. As the second Adam, He succeeded where the first Adam had failed.
      ii. Jesus is now about the business of fulfilling the original call of man by bringing all things under His rule.
   e. Because of Jesus’ resurrection, we joyfully await the resurrection of our own bodies.
      i. Even when we find ourselves in the valley of the shadow of death, we do not pitch a permanent tent there.
      ii. When we visit the grave of a loved one who trusted in Christ, we know that death is not the end of the story.
      iii. Though we may mourn for a season, the time for dancing draws near.
STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Scripture describes death as a beautiful yet mysterious part of human existence.
   a. True
   b. False

2. Anthropologists have found it easy to track the spread of Christianity in ancient times based on __________.
   a. The way death was portrayed in cultural mythologies
   b. The development of new cremation techniques
   c. The use of stone crosses in graveyards
   d. The appearing of cemeteries

3. All of the following statements about deceased Christians are true except __________.
   a. They are free from sickness and pain
   b. Their sanctification is complete
   c. They see Jesus as He is
   d. Every desire of theirs is met

4. Christians in heaven long to be reunited with their glorified bodies.
   a. True
   b. False

5. To say that Jesus Christ was vindicated in His act of rising from the dead is to say that __________.
   a. The disciples no longer doubted His identity and mission
   b. His innocent and righteous status before God was confirmed
   c. His unjust death was avenged
   d. He proved that He was both fully God and fully man

BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways has Christianity influenced the way that people treat their dead? What biblical principles does this reflect?

2. If a friend asked for your advice about whether to have a loved one buried or cremated, how would you respond?

3. Why is it significant that Jesus came to save our bodies and our souls? How does this reality impact the way we live?

4. What tasks(s) did God give to Adam? How has Christ completed what Adam left undone? Why is this important?
MESSAGE INTRODUCTION
Even when we begin to understand why God sends suffering into our lives and what He is bringing about through that suffering, we may still wonder how to relate to Him in the midst of our suffering. In what way is He with us in our times of hardship? Does He actually identify with our pain, or is He merely cheering us on as a spectator? In this message, we will explore what it means to be united to Jesus Christ and how it is that He partakes of our sorrow and pain.

SCRIPTURE READINGS
Romans 9:5; John 17:20-26

TEACHING OBJECTIVES
1. To deny that Christ is a helpless bystander when we suffer.
2. To affirm that Christ is not absent, but present with us in suffering.
3. To promote a robust biblical understanding of our union with Christ.

QUOTATION
We are so near to Christ that we cannot be nearer, for we are one with Him. We are so dear to Christ that we cannot be dearer. Consider how close and tender is the tie when it is true that Christ loved us and gave Himself for us. It is a union more intimate than any other which exists among men, for “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

–Charles Spurgeon
LECTURE OUTLINE

I. The Eternally Blessed Jesus
   a. In discussing Jesus’ attitude to our suffering, we must remain careful not to partition off our theology and our emotions from one another.
      i. We must not think of God as an all-powerful but emotionless being who acts without feeling.
      ii. We must also not think of God as wringing His hands in sorrow, wanting to end suffering but helpless to do so.
   b. Romans 9:5 describes Jesus Christ as being “over all, the eternally blessed God.”
      i. The point of this verse is not that God is generally happy.
      ii. Rather, this verse makes the claim that there never has been and never can be a time when God is not in a state of blessedness and joyfulness.
         1. God has never been lonely or incomplete.
         2. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have eternally shared infinite knowledge of and love for one another.
      iii. This verse does not imply that, in His state of infinite satisfaction, Christ is indifferent to or aloof from our suffering.
   c. Though we may be eager to affirm that Christ knows what it is like to suffer, we may hesitate to go as far as to claim that He knows what it is like to suffer in the specific ways that we suffer.
      i. For example, Dr. Sproul hesitated to tell his wife that Jesus had experienced the pain of leaving a spouse and children behind.
      ii. He hesitated to tell his wife that Jesus had experienced the anguish of cancer.

II. Suffering and Union with Christ
   a. Scripture teaches that those who believe in Christ are united with Him as he is united with the Father (John 17:20-26).
   b. In keeping with Romans 6:1-11, it is important to recognize that it is through our union with Christ that He takes our sin upon Himself and clothes us in His righteousness.
   c. Yet, our union with Christ encompasses far more than the doctrine of substitutionary atonement.
      i. Through our union with Christ, He knows what our suffering is like because He suffers with us.
      ii. When Jesus confronted Saul on the road to Damascus, Jesus expressed that He Himself was the victim of Saul’s persecution (Acts 9:5).
      iii. Similarly, when Denise Sproul was suffering through cancer, Jesus suffered with her and experienced her pain.

III. Union with Christ and His Church
   a. The church of Jesus Christ is described in Scripture as His bride (Ephesians 5:22-33).
i. Christ’s love for the church is not divided up among all the members of the church.

ii. Instead, each person in the church equally shares the entirety of the love, favor, and union that Christ gives to His bride.

b. As part of Christ’s church, Christians are also united to one another.

i. When the church gathers for worship, the entire assembly of God is spiritually gathered at the eternal Mount Zion.

ii. Whenever we join in the church’s corporate worship, our departed friends and loved ones who are with Jesus are spiritually present with us.

c. In all seasons of life, we do well to remember that Jesus is absolutely sovereign, that He is eternally blessed, and that He is present with us.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. The description of Jesus as “eternally blessed” in Romans 9:5 means that __________.
   a. Angels have been singing Christ's praises from all eternity
   b. Jesus has always been happy
   c. Jesus perpetually enjoys full love and delight within the Godhead
   d. Good things regularly happen to Jesus

2. Christ has experienced suffering in general, but He has not suffered in the specific ways that we do.
   a. True
   b. False

3. Acts 9:5 suggests that the doctrine of believers’ union with Jesus Christ applies, at least in part, to __________.
   a. The church’s corporate worship
   b. The imputation of Christ's righteousness to guilty sinners
   c. The imputation of a believer’s sinful record to Jesus
   d. Christ’s sharing in the present experiences of His people

4. Those who believe in Jesus are united to Christ, to the Father, and to one another.
   a. True
   b. False

5. Jesus Christ’s love for the church is __________.
   a. Divided into infinite portions so that each person is loved
   b. Shared fully by each member of the church
   c. Given to the church as a whole instead of to individuals within it
   d. Directed more toward some Christians than to others
BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Once more, Dr. Sproul warned against the danger of changing our theology in order to suit our emotional desires. As we’ve discussed so far, what are some ways that our emotions might shape our theology when it comes to human suffering?

2. When discussing sensitive matters such as suffering and sovereignty, how can we keep our theology and emotions unified rather than in conflict with one another?

3. Think about a time of suffering you have experienced or are experiencing now. How does knowing that Christ suffers with you change this situation?

4. We who are united to Jesus Christ are also united to one another. How does this reality change the way we approach the church’s corporate worship?
Our Union with Christ

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

Our union with Jesus Christ is vast and multifaceted. In our previous session, we spoke about how Christ shares in the sorrows and suffering of those who are united to Him. As we continue our time together, we will see how, because of this mysterious union, Christ also invites us to share in the glories that He now experiences. With this foretaste of heavenly bliss, we can gladly anticipate the day when we will be physically present with our Savior and with the multitude of godly men and women who have gone before us.

SCRIPTURE READING

Ephesians 2:1-7

TEACHING OBJECTIVES

1. To anticipate what awaits Christians after death.
2. To discuss how we share in Christ’s heavenly glory now.
3. To examine the hardship and hope of living with the loss of a loved one.

QUOTATION

The resurrection and sitting in heaven, which are here mentioned, are not yet seen by mortal eyes. Yet, [...] it is as if we had been brought from the deepest hell to heaven itself. And certainly, although, as respects ourselves, our salvation is still the object of hope, yet in Christ we already possess a blessed immortality and glory.

–John Calvin
LECTURE OUTLINE

I. Sharing in Christ’s Glory
   a. When we are united to Jesus Christ, He both enters into our suffering and lifts us up to the heavenly courts.
   b. As friends and loved ones pass away, their deaths are often described with the common cliché: “They have gone on to a better place.”
      i. Unfortunately, this saying is used rather loosely, often of non-Christians.
      ii. Though it is true that deceased Christians have gone to a better place, this phrase fails to capture the glorious reality into which the departed saints have entered.
   c. Christ’s mercy to His people is powerfully expressed when He made us, who were spiritually dead, alive (Ephesians 2:1, 5).
   d. Moreover, He has raised us up to sit with Him in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6).
      i. Often we tend to think of this as a future promise, that one day we will sit with Christ in the heavenly places.
      ii. Yet, whether we realize it or not, this is a present reality.

II. One Flesh
   a. Dr. Sproul knew that life would be hard after his wife died, but he was still unprepared for how difficult it turned out to be.
      i. When a husband and wife become one flesh, there is no seam or perforated line that enables an easy separation.
      ii. When they are parted from one another, flesh is torn from flesh.
      iii. After the death of his wife, Dr. Sproul did not revert to his pre-married condition but instead felt that half of himself was missing.
   b. Though Dr. Sproul grieves that half of him has died, he rejoices that half of him is now with Jesus.
      i. Half of him experiences joy in place of sorrow.
      ii. Half of him no longer sins.
      iii. Half of him loves his children and himself with a perfect, Christ-like love.
      iv. Even though half of him is mourning, half of him is already dancing.
   c. Because of his union with Christ, Dr. Sproul knows that, while he is physically separated from his wife and daughter, he is spiritually present with them at Christ’s side in the heavenly places.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In Dr. Sproul’s estimation, few statements of death express the hope of the future more appropriately than “They have gone on to a better place.”
   a. True
   b. False
2. In Ephesians 2:1, Paul used the metaphor of __________ to describe the spiritual change that Christ brings about in the lives of His people.
   a. Being born again
   b. A bride
   c. One body with many parts
   d. A dead person being made alive

3. Ephesians 2:6 articulates the promise that Christians will one day be raised up to sit with Christ in the heavenly places.
   a. True
   b. False

4. When two people truly become one flesh, there is no easy way to separate them from one another.
   a. True
   b. False

5. Dr. Sproul shared that __________ now experience(s) perfect joy in the heavenly places
   a. Part of him
   b. All who have died
   c. Only supernatural beings
   d. Half of him

BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Consider the familiar phrase “They’ve gone on to a better place.” In what way is this saying helpful? In what way is it not? What is a better way to describe what happens when Christians die?

2. Read Ephesians 2:1 and Ephesians 2:4-5. Why is Paul’s choice of words significant? What do these verses express about the nature of salvation?

3. Why is it difficult to think of ourselves as being seated next to Jesus Christ in the heavenly realm? Why is it important to affirm that this is true?

4. God’s Word offers us the glorious hope of being physically reunited with our friends and loved ones who are in Christ. Which of these reunions do you think will be most poignant for you?
Wounds in Heaven

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION
Jesus Christ’s victory over death was indeed the turning point of history. In His triumph, He reversed the earth’s cycle of chaos and destruction and revealed Himself as the rightful ruler of the cosmos. It is significant that in His exalted state Jesus did not rid himself of his wounds. Instead, He displayed them openly to His disciples. When we take time to consider Christ’s wounds and ours, Jesus enables us to see that pain and sorrow have their own distinct beauty.

SCRIPTURE READING
John 20:24-29

TEACHING OBJECTIVES
1. To describe the cosmic shift that took place when Jesus rose again.
2. To explain why it is fitting that there would be wounds in heaven.
3. To encourage Christians to cherish the beauty in their wounds.

QUOTATION
What does Christ mean by showing to us his hands and feet? He means this: that suffering is absolutely necessary. Christ is the head, and his people are the members. If suffering could have been avoided, surely our glorious Head ought to have escaped; but inasmuch as he shows us his wounds, it is to tell us that we shall have wounds too.

–Charles Spurgeon

LECTURE OUTLINE
I. Jesus Changes Everything
   a. When Jesus walked out of the tomb on the third day, He inaugurated a new epoch in human history.
b. In addition to being the first Easter Sunday, that day might also be called “the third day of thermodynamics.”
   i. The second law of thermodynamics presents the law of entropy, that in a closed system all things tend to degenerate into chaos and disorder.
   ii. Entropy has been the state of things ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin.
   iii. When Jesus rose from the dead, this process of decay was reversed.

c. Even though the physical world still experiences entropy, all things are now moving, not toward chaos and destruction, but toward order.
   i. Human history is moving toward the moment when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.
   ii. Jesus is the victorious lord of new creation who is bringing all things in submission to Himself.

d. Jesus Christ, in His resurrected body, represents the triumphant beginning of a process that has not yet been completed.

II. Glorious Wounds

a. It is striking that, amidst the beauty and the joy of the resurrection, Jesus still bore the wounds of crucifixion on His body (John 20:24-29).
   i. The pain and sorrow of Good Friday were gone.
   ii. Yet, the wounds from these events remained as Jesus prepared to ascend to the Father's side.

b. This narrative suggests that, in the next life, our suffering will not merely disappear or be swept under the cosmic rug of heaven.
   i. Perhaps our suffering will comprise the very beauty of heaven.
   ii. Rather than exchange our tears and ashes for beauty, perhaps they will actually become a crown of glory.

c. As we experience the pain of suffering and loss in this life, we ought not minimize our grief or rush through our times of mourning.
   i. Often it is beauty, not sadness, that moves us to tears.
   ii. At times, however, it is both.

d. The most poignant beauty is sometimes found in sorrow.
   i. God could have created a world in which there would never have been sin and sorrow.
   ii. Instead, He chose to manifest His glory by creating a reality in which sorrow and joy would be interwoven like dark and light threads in a tapestry.

e. The music of Dr. Sproul's life has been characterized by the minor keys of a funeral march during the past year.
   i. Yet, this melancholy music is itself beautiful, as it evokes thoughts of God's grace and faithfulness.
   ii. It is to this music that Denise and Shannon Sproul now dance, clinging to the wounded hands of their Savior.
STUDY QUESTIONS

1. The second law of thermodynamics articulates the principle of ___________.
   a. Inertia
   b. Minutia
   c. Entropy
   d. Gravity

2. Why does Dr. Sproul describe Easter Sunday as the “third day of thermodynamics?”
   a. Jesus reversed the pattern of cosmic chaos and destruction.
   b. The laws of thermodynamics shed light on Jesus’ miracles.
   c. The resurrection of Jesus erased all chaos and destruction.
   d. Jesus’ death and resurrection proved the laws of thermodynamics.

3. Human history is advancing on a trajectory toward every knee bowing before Christ.
   a. True
   b. False

4. John 20:24-29 suggests that ___________.
   a. Only the most holy people will have wounds in heaven
   b. All evidence of suffering will be stripped away in the next life
   c. In heaven we will no longer remember life’s trials and hardships
   d. Our wounds and scars may be part of heaven’s glory

5. Beauty and sorrow are antithetical to one another.
   a. True
   b. False

BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What wounds and scars do you bear that reveal God's grace and goodness?

2. At what moment(s) in your life have you found beauty amidst sorrow?

3. What would you say are the three most important things that you have learned in this twelve-part study of suffering and divine sovereignty?

4. How have you been challenged during this study of suffering? How might God use this experience to make you more like Jesus Christ?