

Matthew 22-12-04b

We resume our study now, we are looking at the role of suffering in God's plan and purpose, and we find that it is actually central. It is a vital point of contact and shared experience that helps bridge the gulf between God and man. We have always appreciated the Lord Jesus as the mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.

And looking at God in heaven and man on earth and the Lord Jesus spanning that gulf on our behalf as an expression of God's love is something we have long appreciated. But the role of suffering where suffering is understood in an experiential way in heaven with the Lord Jesus seated at the right hand of the Father making intercession for us as a member of the Trinity that has experienced suffering firsthand. God the Holy Spirit indwelling every believer, filling many believers who suffer also has an intimate knowledge of our suffering.

This is why his name is the Comforter. As John speaks to his disciples in John 14 and says, I will send you another Comforter. The Lord Jesus comforts us.

One of his assigned functions from God the Father is to comfort us in our affliction. God the Holy Spirit comforts us, and he is a firsthand witness in the same way that we witnessed suffering near at hand to us, the Holy Spirit does as well. So our first point, suffering entered the human world as a result of sin.

Genesis 3, Romans 5, Romans 8, 18 through 24. We know that the whole creation groans, this is verse 22 of Romans 8, and labors with birth pangs together until now. Creation experiences birth pangs.

Birth pangs are often represented as one of the most severe levels of pain that can be experienced, and they are assigned metaphorically to creation. Creation suffers. Not only that, verse 23, but we also who have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.

We are saved, we belong to God, we are related to the Father through Christ, we have the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have the presence and power of God's Word, we have so many wonderful manifestations, we have the forgiveness of our sins, we have so many blessings in Christ, but we have not yet finished the experience of our salvation. We await the adoption and redemption of our body. It is in our body that we suffer, it is in our body that we observe the suffering of others, and redemption of our body, adoption into the heavenly family is going to release us from that.

It is going to bring it to an end. Verse 24, we were saved in this hope. We were saved, but we still have that hope.

It is future. Hope that is seen is not hope. Why does one still hope for what he sees? But

if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.

We develop hope, we rely on hope, our hope is a comfort. And in verse 26, likewise, the Spirit also helps us in our weaknesses. The Spirit aids us in our sufferings.

It is so essential to have the perception of our need so that we can receive God's help. If we don't feel that we need salvation, we don't look to the Lord Jesus for it. We don't place our trust in Him as Savior, because there are people who don't think they need salvation.

Suffering is a reminder, among many other roles, among many other facets of suffering, it is a reminder of our need. And when the Holy Spirit gives us comfort in our weaknesses, in our sufferings, in our times of shortfall, in our times of inadequacy, in our times of feeling that we're about to be overwhelmed by circumstance or by oppression, the Spirit helps us. We do not know what we should pray for, as we ought.

Many times we are praying that God will eliminate an effect, or eliminate a result, or eliminate a circumstance when we really, in a better light and with more knowledge and greater wisdom and a closer affinity with God's thinking, we would pray differently. We would be praying that God will remedy something at its root, at its cause. Many times in praying for something outside of ourselves, we really ought to be praying for something within ourselves.

The Holy Spirit Himself makes intercession with groanings which cannot be uttered. Groanings, expressions of suffering relating to God the Father, the nature of our suffering that we can't even express. We can't put into words, but the Holy Spirit transmits them directly to the throne of the Father.

And the Lord Jesus is there as the second witness. And between our prayers, the groanings of the Spirit, and the intercession of the Lord Jesus in the mouth of two or three witnesses, a thing is established before God. Verse 27, he who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is because he makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

And we know that all things work together for good. And that is the run-up to Romans 8.28 and following. All things working together for good is in the context of groanings and sufferings, creation, and the saints waiting for redemption, waiting for the fulfillment of salvation.

We would not have the strong, personal, experiential sense of our need for deliverance and, by the way, the need for the lake of fire. As you know, it is my personal conviction that the lake of fire is not eternal conscious torment. What it does represent is the everlasting destruction of sin and death, and sinners, whether angelic or human, they are eternally destroyed and eliminated from existence.

Why is that necessary? Can't God somehow preserve especially my loved ones who are adamant, aggressive unbelievers? No, he can't. We might question that. We might second-guess it.

We might try to find a way in our own hearts and minds. What convinces us that sin and those who practice it and sponsor it and choose it in their free will have to be utterly eliminated from the living universe? Suffering. Those who reject God create in their environment of sin, suffering.

Sin and suffering go hand in hand. God could not dry every tear. God could not eliminate suffering from the future kingdoms, especially and most particularly the kingdom of the Father, without eliminating sin.

And if sin is the choice of a creature with free will, then the creature who chooses it has to go. This is why Satan and the fallen angels and those who are not written in the book of life are cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

Like the first death, it is elimination and non-existence from the world of the living. There is no alternative. We would not understand this if we had not experienced the intensity and the tragedy and the catastrophe of suffering.

It is a demonstration to the angels. It is a demonstration to the human race. It has to be eliminated.

So Jesus suffered to enter into our world. Hebrews 2. We saw this last time. I will quickly review it.

Hebrews 2.10-18. It was fitting for Him, the Lord Jesus, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory. It is fitting that in bringing us to the Father, in bringing sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation complete, perfect through suffering. That is actually sufferings plural, different kinds of suffering, different qualities of suffering.

It was fitting for God the Father, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation, the Lord Jesus Christ, complete, perfect through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one. This was our point in the first session.

We are bound and united to God, not only in our appreciation for righteousness and for goodness and for peace and for prosperity and for blessedness, but we are united with Him in suffering. We know not only the positive side of righteousness and justice and love and eternal life, but we also know experientially what happens when those things are sacrificed by free will, choosing something else, choosing self, choosing one's own way. God knows what it's like experientially and so do we.

Those He sanctifies and He who sanctifies, they are all of one. This is why He is not ashamed to call them brethren. It's not a figure of speech.

It's not sort of a malaprop or an inappropriate way for the Lord Jesus to refer to us. Instead of saying, well, I'm the shepherd and you're the sheep, He is the lamb that was slain. He has become one of the sheep.

He is not only figured as the good shepherd, He has also figured Himself as the Lamb of God, taking away the sin of the world. This is why it's not inappropriate for Him to call us brethren. Saying, verse 12, I will declare your name to my brethren in the midst of the assembly, I will sing praise to you.

The Lord Jesus celebrates the glory of the Father in our midst as one of us. And again, I will put my trust in Him. The Lord Jesus knows what it's like to trust God for what we can't necessarily understand or explain.

And again, here I am and the children whom God has given me. Appreciation for God the Father, the gifts that He gives, the bonds that He creates, the familial relationships that He sponsors among us in the horizontal realm and from us to God Himself in heaven. Here I am and the children whom God has given me.

So, Hebrews 2.14, inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, that's us, flesh and blood, bread and the contents of the cup, flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same. He shared in our flesh and blood, and in representative terms in the upper room, Jesus says, you have to share in my flesh and blood. I have shared in yours, you must share in mine.

Again, Hebrews 2.14, inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, so that through death, remember anytime you see death, you can add suffering, that through suffering death, He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is the devil. It is essential that Jesus enter into our flesh and blood and suffer what we suffer, and enter into the death that is caused by sin, in order that He can destroy Satan who has the power of death, and release us, this is verse 15 now, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. There is a slavery, we are trying to end suffering, we're trying to avoid suffering, we're trying to minimize suffering, but there is a slavery from which we cannot escape, because sin and death rule this world, and the ruler of this world has the power of sin, and the power of death to exercise.

Verse 16, indeed He does not give help to angels, but He does give help to the seed of Abraham, He aids those who express the faith of Abraham, and thereby become Abraham's children. Therefore in all things, He had to be made like His brethren, the Lord Jesus had to be made like us in all things, in order that He might be a merciful and faithful high priest, a high priest with mercy at a high level, because He understands

those on whom He is being merciful, to whom He is being merciful, and faithful. You don't necessarily think of the Lord Jesus needing faith, we are to express faith in Him, but when it says He is a high priest full of faith, if it is just ultimately we say, well, He's been a real faithful husband, He's done all of His husbandly duties, we don't think of a faithful husband as expressing faith in the wife, or faith in marriage, or faith in family, or whatever.

We say faithful in the sense of fulfilling obligations, and being dutiful. We use it as a synonym for dutiful, and you would say, well, He's a merciful and dutiful high priest. It doesn't say dutiful or obedient, it says full of faith.

The Lord Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith. He has pioneered the life that trusts God despite negative consequences, despite rejection, despite pain, despite suffering. The Lord Jesus pioneered this, He has experienced it firsthand, therefore He can be our merciful and full of faith high priest in things pertaining to God, and this qualifies Him to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

Verse 18, Hebrews 2, in that He Himself has suffered, being tried, being tempted, being tested, He is able to aid those who are tempted, tested. He is able to help us uniquely so because He Himself has suffered what we suffer, and we can go to Him with confidence because we know He knows what it's like. This is the nature of many support groups.

As I mentioned last time, people like to converse, and now the online technology has made this possible to unite with people across the country and across the world. If you have a particular affliction, a particular loss, a particular kind of suffering, you can join a group of others, and there is a unique comfort in talking with people who have been through exactly what you have been through, whether it is the loss of a spouse, loss of a child, a particular kind of treatment, the side effects of some particular malady or affliction or disease or surviving burns or whatever it may be. On the human level, the soul finds a degree of comfort in shared experience of suffering.

That is a pale shadow. It is a mere reflection of the reality of the comfort that we find in Christ through the Holy Spirit because there is divine power in that fellowship. There is sympathy, there is empathy, there is understanding that provides a form of earthly comfort in talking to people who have a shared experience, but it pales to insignificance in the shared sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ and the unity that we experience in the Holy Spirit with the Lord Jesus and with one another.

Believers who can bear one another's burdens, believers who can weep with those who weep, have the power of the Lord Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit energizing that comfort and making a completely new environment that provides power in suffering, genuine and lasting comfort in suffering and exposes the divine purpose for our suffering as we not only share the suffering, but we share our hope, our confidence that God is working it together for good. This is Romans 8. You also find this in 1 Peter

3.18, Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. That's a part of our point two.

Jesus suffered to enter into our sufferings, to unite with us and create a unity in His body with God Himself and to bring us to God. This is what Peter says, Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body, but made alive in the Spirit.

Our bodies are dying, but we are constantly being enlivened, being infused with divine life by God's Holy Spirit. After being made alive, He went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits. This is a communication, this is an expression of the perfect plan and purpose of God that transcends even the human race, transcends our experience and is an example and a teaching point for all sentient creation.

1 Peter 4.1, Therefore, since Christ suffered in His body, not just in His mind, not in His spirit, He didn't remain in the divine heavenly realms and experience a kind of mental angst at suffering. He experienced it in His body. Arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin.

This was our point in the first session. When we suffer in the body, we're done with sin. I don't ever want this kind of thing to come back in God's heaven or God's earth.

When the new heavens and the new earth appear, let's never even think about reintroducing sin or suffering. Whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. I know what the source of this suffering is, whatever its proximate cause.

The only reason there's suffering in this world of any kind is sin. I'm done with sin. You're never going to drag me into sin.

When I leave this life and I am perfected, I am sanctified, I am glorified with Christ, I am entered into heavenly realms, I can walk with Him in white, I have a new name, I partake of the hidden manna, I rule and reign with Christ, I walk with Him in white, all of the wonderful overcomer blessings of Revelation chapter 2 and 3. Sin is the farthest thing from my mind. I don't worry about choosing it in the eternal future, because I have suffered here and I'm done with sin. I am done with sin.

No worries in the eternal future. God doesn't have to lock down my free will, because as a result of suffering, you could never drag me with wild horses to even to begin to consider a single particle of sin in the future. God will have a universe and a new earth full of free will creatures who choose to love Him, who choose to serve Him, who understand Him as never before, and who will never stray into sin, because we have experienced, along with God, its horrific effects.

1 Peter 4.1, whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. Number three, these are facets. No one of these explains suffering.

No one of these exhausts suffering. These are aspects. These are facets.

It reminds me of John 1.18. No one has seen God at any time, but God the Son, the Lord Jesus, the Son of Man has revealed Him. Jesus says, if you've seen me, you've seen the Father. When we see the Lord Jesus, when He reveals the Father, He reveals specific aspects in specific contexts.

Looking at the Lord Jesus in His incarnation does not exhaust the subject of God. It does not fully reveal everything about God. God is the Creator.

Did Jesus create anything in His humanity? God is the One who makes decrees. Did Jesus decree anything in His humanity? There are aspects of God that are revealed, but it is necessarily limited. It is like this.

I've used this illustration before, but I think it's a good one. I can hold up a picture. Now people wouldn't take it out of their wallet.

They would pull it up on their phone and they would say, you see this? This is my wife, Patti. Here's Patti. Look at this picture.

Look at this wonderful, beautiful woman. The fulfillment of my dreams. Here she is.

And you could see that. And if you ever met Patti in person, if this is somebody that's never met her, when they see her, they would recognize her and they'd say, oh, that must be Patti. I remember seeing her on the phone or on your photo.

Does the photo fully express and communicate everything that she is? No. But it makes her recognizable. It is the entrance point to coming to know more about her.

And I can say this is my wife. If I want to be really technical as an English major, I can say this is a picture of my wife. We are made and the Lord Jesus is the fullness of the image of God, but an image is not a full expression.

The incarnation is not the full expression. This is the mistake that, you know, reconstructive, progressive, love hermeneutic Christianity makes, is it tries to put the part for the whole. It is a fallacy.

And yes, everything you see in Christ is a reflection of the Father, but everything about the Father is not in that one picture. I could show you movies of someone I love, and you still, that's a succession of pictures, thousands of pictures, depicting movement and activity and size and different lighting and different contexts and their voice and their laughter and so on. It still doesn't provide the full experience.

You have to come to know for yourself, the fullness of a person, a picture, and even a video won't do it. In the same way, we see these aspects of suffering that are spoken of in scripture, but this is not the explanation for suffering. You don't put down these five

points.

Okay, now I understand suffering. These are simply facets and aspects. There are things both knowable and unknowable about the role of suffering.

It is the single biggest question of human life. It's the reason Bart Ehrman wrote his book, *God's Problem*. Suffering is not our problem.

It's God's problem. You can't even get past the title without Bart's problem being rephrased as God's problem. How the Bible fails to answer our most important question, why we suffer.

Well, the Bible actually does have quite a bit to say. We've seen it so far as you move on in 1 Peter 4-12. Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you.

The fact that there is suffering in the world, and you have entered into some of it, should not be a surprise. Sin entered the world, and death by sin, death passed upon all men, therefore suffering passes on all men. So you should not be surprised if your suffering has taken the form of a fiery ordeal.

Not a minimal ordeal, not an inconvenient ordeal. It's a fiery ordeal. It's exceedingly painful.

Something from which I would like to escape right this second. Fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you. Peter says, don't think something strange is happening to you, but rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ.

Redirect your focus from the immediate effect and the victim of that suffering to the shared experience we have with God Himself through Christ. Peter is not saying, rejoice in your suffering. It's misconstrued this way a lot.

Oh, count it all joy when you fall into various temptations, therefore, you're in a fiery ordeal, so rejoice. Nobody is going to rejoice at a fiery ordeal. What we can do is look at that ordeal and say, well, to the extent that something is pure, to the extent that something is noble or lovely or honorable or of good report, think on these things.

Suffering is no fun. A fiery ordeal is horrific, but what I can rejoice in, not the suffering itself, which reflects the presence of sin itself, and we don't rejoice in that, but it gives me a unique point of contact with Jesus Christ Himself. Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ so that you may be overjoyed.

You joy now, and you will be overjoyed when His glory is revealed. Why? Suffering is in the past. I am inoculated against sin.

I'm done with sin. I had affliction for a moment, but it has worked for me an eternal

weight of glory. No suffering is pleasant.

Some of it is just unimaginably unpleasant. We have to discipline our minds to find those things in Scripture that explain how it fits into God's plan. Different sufferings have different manifestations, different aspects that come to the fore.

But when we suffer, when it is a fiery ordeal that comes on us to test us, the test is, am I going to feel sorry for myself or am I going to focus on the sufferings of Christ and rejoice that this is something I have in common with the Savior? He, you know, people always say, I love her because she gets me. Well, to use that colloquialism, the Lord Jesus gets us in our suffering. He fully understands it.

He has experienced it Himself. And unlike compatriots in the human realm that are in a support group or on a chat board or whatever, there is divine enablement, there is divine sympathy, there is divine power and divine purpose that transcends that suffering and puts it in the context of eternity. 1 Peter 5, 10.

The God of all grace who called you to His eternal glory in Christ. Do you see the constant theme of future glory, of in Christ, of fellowship of His sufferings, rejoicing that He shared our sufferings and we share His. The God of all grace who called you to His eternal glory in Christ after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

Would I be willing to endure affliction to have the personal ministry of God Himself to strengthen me, to make me firm and steadfast? Why will we be firm and steadfast? Why do we need that in the future? Because we will still have free will. God doesn't strap it down on the plus side. I hooked up a battery charger yesterday.

You got to be real careful. Negative data. Positive to positive.

We talk about our chooser having a positive response and a negative response. I say, oh, what if I do what Satan did? What if I do what Adam and Eve did? Sometime in the future, something happens and I fall astray. No worries.

That's one of many reasons why we experience and observe suffering in this life. Why the Lord Jesus Himself undertook to suffer with us and on our behalf. It will restore us and make us strong, firm and steadfast.

The more severe our suffering in this life, and when we are delivered from that suffering and the sin that causes and sponsors it, how likely do you think somebody that has severely suffered is ever going to have a moment's thought about turning back and reinventing a sinful world? Not a chance. Not a chance. The most ardent advocates against drunk driving are mothers who have lost children to drunk drivers because they've experienced it.

Do you think any of them drink a half a bottle of gin and then get behind the wheel? Farthest thing from their mind. They will clobber you with anything they can find if they see you trying to do the same. They've experienced the suffering and that suffering has absolutely permanently cured them from any sympathy for drinking and driving.

It is the same with our suffering. Number four, and our final point for this morning, suffering for specific personal benefit so that the grace of God and the power of Christ may rest upon us. God creates or allows a hardship, a deficit, a loss, you think of Job, you think of the Apostle Paul with his thorn in the flesh in 2 Corinthians 12, lest I should be exalted above measure.

I could have gone off the rails with excitement and distraction and being full of myself because of what I saw revealed from the third heaven. And he says it twice, lest I be exalted above measure, lest I be exalted above measure, a thorn in the flesh was given to me. My thorn in the flesh is a gift.

It buffets me. It bangs me around. It beats me.

Buffet means beat. This is like beat with a bat, beat with a big stick. It beats me.

I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. He said, my grace is sufficient for you for my strength is made perfect in weakness. The Lord Jesus himself was made perfect through sufferings and God's strength is perfected in us.

In the long view, with hope and looking at eternity, would I love to be a place where God's strength and God's power has been perfected, where by God's grace and through God's power, I have been made strong, firm, steadfast, fully restored. And in order for that to happen, there had to be a deficit. There had to be a weakness.

There had to be an area of extreme suffering. And God used that and worked it together for my personal benefit, my personal blessing, a uniquely tailored blessing from God. I can't see it.

I can't understand it. I'm not experienced it in the moment of suffering, but I know it's coming. This is faith.

This is hope. And this is love. The child that recognizes that even as their parent disciplines them, spans them, revokes a privilege, takes away an opportunity because of failure, the child that knows in their heart that this is done for their benefit because their parent loves them, that's a child the parent is ultimately going to be able to have a wonderful, close, lasting relationship with because they get their parents and their parents get them.

The parents understand what the child cannot at the time, but when the child matures, they will understand why discipline was harsh, why correction was necessary, and how

we became a better person for it, even though it was not enjoyable at all at the time. But it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Foolishness that was bound up in my heart has been driven far from me by a rod of correction.

So sometimes, in some ways, our suffering is a means by which God confers a gift and a personal benefit of eternal value to us. 5. Suffering is an opportunity for the works of God to be revealed. Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.

He wasn't sent blindness. God didn't decree that he be born blind. It is one of the inevitable concomitants of the presence of sin in the world, is that there is imperfection.

There is genetic decay and disruption and disintegration. And there are natural disasters. There are physical corruptions that are a part of fallen nature.

God allows these and does not prevent them, because in them his glory can be manifested. It is linked to the previous point. 6. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day.

The night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world. The fallenness, the brokenness, the blindness, the suffering, catastrophes, hardships are in the world.

But there is also a light in the world, and we choose. Do I choose the light or do I love darkness rather than light, because my heart is evil and my deeds are evil? What do I choose? It creates a decision point. If you want light and you choose light, light enters through Jesus Christ.

So we'll see next time in our sixth point that suffering is a witness to the life of Jesus. The Lord Jesus came and suffered on our behalf. He is gone, but we are here, and our sufferings reflect his sufferings, and the purpose in his suffering is communicated in our sufferings.

We'll see that this is a wonderfully detailed expression of truth in Scripture that we'll look at next time. But I hope it is an encouragement. I hope that it is an object of our faith and a motivation to continue to look forward to the return of the Lord Jesus, the restoration of all things, our deliverance from the groaning of creation and the groaning within ourselves.

When the Lord Jesus returns, our sufferings will end because their purpose is complete, and our future with God the Father through the Lord Jesus is secure, even as we are free to worship and free to serve throughout all of eternity. Father, thank you for the truth of your word. Thank you for the hardship and suffering that you allow into our lives.

Thank you for the point of contact you created with yourself through the Lord Jesus

Christ, who has entered into our sufferings and into whose sufferings we ourselves can enter. We pray that the Holy Spirit will give us understanding, enlighten our hearts, give us fortitude and endurance, patience of hope, until that day when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven to take us to himself and present us before your throne. We pray it in Jesus' name.

Amen.