

I. Introduction

This morning, we are transitioning to the next section of the class. Up to this point, Kent and I have been seeking to bring to you the theological foundation to prepare us for when we experience suffering, so that we might know God in and through suffering and persecution. For the next four weeks, we are going to be discussing more practical implications of suffering, while keeping in view the biblical perspectives that we have covered in prior classes.

To do so, we are using the book “Suffering” by Paul David Tripp to bring the topics we will discuss to the class. It will be helpful to frame the next four weeks by first giving some background on the book. Tripp wrote this book because of a personal experience that he went through when his health took a sudden turn for the worse and his entire life changed. He went from being someone with a great deal of strength and ability to teach and travel on a rigorous schedule, to being weak, in pain and suffering with illness literally overnight. He presents the entire book after beginning with describing what he went through, and the book is very personal. I would encourage you to read this book. It is very accessible. Tripp is very anecdotal in his writing, starting with his own story, as he presents a topic in each chapter. We will not spend time going over the stories in this class because of time so I would encourage you to go read them on your own time. Often, stories are helpful when we are suffering, or considering the topic of suffering, because we see that there are others that experience suffering.

Tripp uses his story, and the stories of others, in this book because he makes the point that suffering is never abstract, theoretical, or impersonal, and it is never neutral. Suffering is deeply personal and specific. Scripture never avoids suffering and scripture never looks down on the sufferer. Scripture always presents stories of suffering in a very real and personal light and points us to a God who invites sufferers to come to him for help and who promises to one day end all suffering of any kind

for good through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. So, in the four weeks, we will be taking the theological foundation that we have laid and place it in the lessons from this book born out of the story of one man's suffering. Our hope is that these next four weeks will be encouraging to those who are experience suffering now and help prepare those of us who may not be in a season of suffering to suffer well and know God more through suffering. The reason why we need to bring the foundation to these topics is because suffering is never neutral. To quote Tripp here, "You never just suffer the thing that you're suffering, but you always also suffer the way that you're suffering that thing." What he means by that is we don't suffer empty handed. Our lives are shaped both by what we're suffering and what we bring to it, our thoughts about ourselves, life, God, and others. And if we don't bring a solid foundation to our suffering, we can struggle. If we're not careful we can bring things like poor theology, pride and self-reliance, doubt of God, unrealistic expectations of others, materialism, among many other possible things. Our goal is to bring some of those forward so we can properly prepare and experience suffering.

Over the next two weeks, we will be looking first at what Tripp calls six different "Traps." Things that we can experience in suffering, that are potential dangers if we are not careful. The following two weeks, Kent will finish the class with spiritual comforts that our ours in suffering.

II. The Awareness Trap

The first Trap we will consider is the Awareness Trap. The idea that, when we are suffering, if not prepared, we will be tempted to look at others and be aware that our situation looks very different from others from the outside and the awareness that no matter what other people say to you to try and comfort you, they will never have the power to rid you of your pain. If not careful, we can fall into the trap of thinking that the distance between their understanding and the reality of our suffering is so great that what people say to us is of little help at all. Here we must be careful because suffering is not just a

physical or mental thing, but it is also spiritual. If we either look around us at others or listen to what people say and think that they just don't understand so how could they help, we can be tempted to then grow bitter and begin complaining against God because of what we are going through. We must guard our hearts. A key verse that Tripp brings up a few times is Proverbs 4:23 - **“Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.”**

We can be tempted to complain and grow bitter when we are “aware” that others' situations look different from ours because we begin to look around us horizontally and turn our eyes inward on ourselves while we are suffering rather than looking heavenward, as it were, to take up the cry of the psalmist to appropriately mourn the situation that we are experiencing in such a way where we do not diminish what we are going through, but still acknowledge the God who is in control of all things. There are 67 lament psalms. Which means that about 44% of the book of psalms is about suffering and sorrow. It is clear that the Bible does not minimize suffering and we should follow that example. Let's look at one of them, Psalm 13. **(Read Psalm 13)** Notice that the first 2 verses are a cry to the Lord that any of us could cry out with in times of sorrow. David does not give a reason in the first two verses. It is not until verse 4 where he brings up his enemies. See where he ends in verses 5 and 6. David does not end with turning his eyes inward to himself, but upward to the Lord. He preaches to himself a reminder that he has trusted in the Lord and the result of that trust is going to be worship. He says, “I will sing to the Lord...” with the reason of how the Lord has dealt with him. He also doesn't compare himself to others.

When I was coaching basketball as part of my regular work, one of my favorite sayings I would tell my players was one attributed to Teddy Roosevelt, “Comparison is the thief of joy.” When we are going through suffering and we become aware that our situation, on the outside, looks very different from those around us, we can be tempted to compare and become bitter, and rob ourselves of our joy if

we're not careful. But we don't really know all the time what other people are going through and the comparison we are making in our heads may be the furthest thing from the truth. What we should be comparing is the comparison that Jesus makes in Matthew 6:26-29. While this passage in context is about being anxious, when we suffer, we can also be anxious. Jesus tells us to consider the birds and the lilies and ask ourselves, "If God takes care of those, how much more will he take care of me?" We must be careful what we are aware of and how we respond to that awareness when we are suffering.

III. The Fear Trap

The next trap is the Fear Trap. This builds off the awareness that we are suffering because as we are aware of suffering in our own lives, we need to be careful how that affects what we are meditating on. Tripp contrasts two Old Testament examples to make this point.

For the first, let's turn to Genesis 22:1-9. **(Read Gen 22:1-9)** Finally, the promised son was here. Isaac was born. Then God asks the unthinkable. How could Abraham go through this. Wasn't he afraid? Verse 8 tells us of his unwavering trust in the Lord. But how did he have that after we have record of him acting in fear when he says that Sarah is his sister twice out of fear? To get that answer, let's turn to Romans 4:17-21 **(read out loud)** verse 21 is the key, Abraham was fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. His faith did not weaken, verse 19, no unbelief made him waver, verse 20. Abraham spent years, meditating on the promise of God and when he was tested, he did still did not waver. In what could have been a time of melting under suffering, Abraham continued to lean on the promises of God and believed that God was able to raise Isaac from the dead, as we read in Hebrews 11:19.

Contrast that with the account of the Israelites in I Samuel 17. We have the account of Goliath in this chapter. The Israelites and the Philistines were against each other in battle. Rather than face the

whole army in the fight, the Philistines sent their mightiest warrior out to challenge Israel's mightiest warrior in a fight. Winner take all. Goliath, of course, was a huge man who came out each day and taunted Israel and God. In verse 11 we see the response of the Israelites. **(read vs 11)** Saul and his army, rather than turning back to the promises of God to go into battle with them and meditate on the what the Lord had promised Israel, were dismayed and greatly afraid. They did not take their eyes off what was around them and look to the Lord.

So, we must ask ourselves now, before we get to suffering, what has hold of our meditation today? When times are good, what do we meditate on? Do we look at all the good things and stay there? Do we look around us and compare ourselves to others when times are good? If we do, and we are not meditating on Scripture and the promises of God in the good times, when suffering comes, we will continue to look around us and meditate on our circumstances. This is because meditation on the wrong things stimulates fear. Suffering teaches us that we are not in control and if we aren't careful to have the correct understanding of who God is we can find ourselves thinking that he is distant, uncaring, or neglectful of our circumstances rather than continuing to meditate on God's presence and glory during suffering.

We must remember too that we are in constant spiritual warfare. Spiritual warfare is not something unusual, mystic or on the fringes in some way. Spiritual warfare shows up in the mundane. This is why Tripp brings up Proverbs 4:23 several times. Strongs Concordance gives the definition of the Hebrew word translated vigilance as "place of confinement, jail, prison, guard, watch, observance." Those who watch over a jail don't let things out or in. We must do the same with our hearts and be mindful of what we let in as that will impact what comes out when we are in times of suffering.

Fear also makes us forgetful, and we must fight forgetfulness by reminding ourselves of God's goodness. Ps 136 is an example of how we can do this. Let's turn to Psalm 136. We won't read the whole thing together but look at the repeated phrase through the entire Psalm. It is a reminder of the enduring love of God repeated after reminders of who God is and what He has done. These are not the empty phrases as Jesus describes them in Matthew 6 thinking that we will be heard for many words. These are the words of one who is giving themselves a reminder of God to encourage their heart. It is a good example of what we can do to encourage our hearts, so we are not forgetful when we are in times of suffering and fear.

If we are not careful and fear makes us forgetful, we are in danger of fear becoming our guide. We must remember that we will never live a fear-free life. We must follow the example of Jesus in John 16:32 - **"Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me."** In this time of trouble and potential fear, Jesus preached to himself the presence of his Father. We must do the same when we are not fearful and suffering so that when we are in those times, we can remind ourselves of the presence of God and have that be our guide.

So how do we overcome fear? With the fear of the Lord and the knowledge that earthly fear is temporary, and God's loving care is eternal. The fear of things in this life when we are suffering causes us to worry and be anxious. But the fear of the Lord does not cause us to be afraid, but to have a reverence for God, a knowledge of God that is founded on what the Bible has to say about His character rather than our circumstances and experiences in this fallen world being the lens through which we interpret who God is and what we think about Him. Only a proper understanding of God can overwhelm any earthly fear we might be facing because of suffering.

God's eternal loving care is something that we need to keep constantly in the front of our minds. We need to remind ourselves that his presence will be with us forever and our suffering will not determine our final destiny. We need to ask ourselves if there are any areas of our lives where we are treating our fear and suffering as though it has more power over us than God.

We will leave the other four traps Tripp brings up for next week. So, as we go into the week, let's remind ourselves of these things, meditate on who God is as He has revealed Himself in Scripture, remember that the Bible does not minimize suffering but presents to us our God who is in control of all things, so that when we experience suffering we are not fearful or forgetful, but trusting. Next week we will look at the traps of envy, doubt, denial, and discouragement before Kent wraps up with spiritual comforts.

Questions

1. How can thinking about suffering as spiritual warfare encourage us to persevere?
2. How does having a suffering Savior encourage us in our suffering? Think of what we discussed about awareness and fear.
3. How does our view of God inform our experience of suffering?