

S T U D Y G U I D E

Surprised by Suffering

R. C. Sproul



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

Renew your Mind.

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421 Ligonier Court, Sanford, FL 32771

E-mail: info@ligonier.org

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Introduction

Martin Luther said, “Until a person experiences suffering, he cannot know what it means to hope.” Suffering brings with it pain, anguish, and usually fear. When suffering intrudes our daily lives, the commonplace affairs are pushed into insignificance. We become consumed by the immediate pressures of the moment.

In suffering, our minds change their focus. We ask, “Why?” “Will things ever get better?” These questions push us to thoughts about God. We wonder, even, *demand* an answer for our struggles from our Maker. Sometimes we grow angry with God Himself, until we flee to Him for our comfort. Like the ancient Hebrew people, we long for the consolation of Israel.

In times of suffering, faith leaps to the forefront of our concern. Faith engages in a wrestling match with our emotions. The enemy is despair. Despair assaults our faith and the outcome of the battle is not always certain for us. When Erasmus complained about the apparent unfairness of human misery, he cried out, “Let God be good!” To this implied assault on the righteousness of God, Martin Luther replied, “Let God be God!”

To let God be God is the highest task of faith in the midst of suffering. It is what Herman Melville understood when he said, “Until we learn that one grief outweighs a thousand joys, we will not know what Christianity is trying to make us.” To inquire about suffering is to make inquiry about God. Either God is involved in our suffering or He is not God. Christianity knows nothing of a God who absents Himself from human pain and grief. God is no mere spectator of our dilemma. He is sovereign *over* it. He is sovereign *in* it.

To remove God from human suffering is to quit the pilgrimage of faith. No greater insult to God’s sovereignty can be uttered than to render Him helpless and impotent with regard to our grief. God majors in suffering. He displays His holy involvement in all suffering in the person and work of Christ. Our Savior is a suffering Savior, a Savior acquainted with grief and on intimate terms with sorrow. Herein lies the victory, that Christ is both victim and victor for us.

Suffering: A Case Study

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

Often the first questions that come to people who suffer are “Why me?” or “How can a good God allow anything so bad?” Worse than the pain of suffering is the hopelessness that comes with a sense that there is no purpose or value to the pain. This session explores the purpose of pain and suffering in order to gain an understanding of God’s relationship to the tragedies that intrude into human life.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session you will:

1. Identify common emotions that accompany pain and suffering
2. Explore God’s relationship with human pain and suffering.
3. Consider the benefit Christ’s suffering provides for a person in pain.
4. Share your awareness of God’s involvement in pain.

QUOTATION

Over all injustice, all pain, all suffering, stands a sovereign God who works His plan of salvation over, against, and even through evil.

—R.C. Sproul

LECTURE OUTLINE

- A. The first question when we suffer: Why?
 1. Worse than pain is a sense that suffering has no value or purpose. For example, a woman will endure pain of childbirth because of the anticipation of new life.
 2. How do you go through pain if the end is only death?
 - a. The mother of a dead infant needs to hold the baby to experience the fruit of her labor.
 3. What do you say when someone says they cannot take it anymore?

- a. Listen and hold hands.
 - b. Martin Luther: “It is the duty of every Christian to be Christ to his neighbor”—to bring His peace and comfort to people in pain.
- B. Are pain and suffering from the devil?
1. Erroneous views separating God and suffering
 - a. God doesn’t have anything to do with suffering.
 - b. If God is loving and powerful, He could not allow suffering.
 2. Biblical view connecting God and suffering
 - a. The God of Judaism Christianity majors in suffering.
 1. The nation of Israel: Formed out of pain of slavery (“God heard the cry of His people”).
 2. Bible: The history of a Deity who is intimately involved with pain and suffering
 3. Jesus: A man of sorrows acquainted with grief (the Suffering Servant)
 4. God: Lord of life, death, pain, suffering
 - b. Conclusion: It is impossible that any pain could be without purpose.
 1. We may not be able to discern the purpose of pain in an individual, but the character of God allows us to trust Him.
 2. The common emotions of suffering (anger, fear, surprise) are all known to God.
 3. 1 Peter 4:12: “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering”

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. When did you first become aware of God’s involvement in your suffering?
2. How do most of us tend to respond when there is no evident purpose in our suffering?
3. What should we do when God’s purpose is not clear and we feel overcome by fear, anger, or shock?
4. How can we determine whether specific suffering *is* the consequence of specific sin, an attack from Satan, or a test from the Lord?
5. How can a good God let bad things happen to “nice” people?
6. Can general suffering, not just suffering for our Christian faith, be counted as sharing in the suffering of Christ (1 Peter 4:13)?

BIBLE STUDY

1. Write your personal, thoughtful response to these Scripture passages:
 - a. Psalm 16:7–11
 - b. Psalm 73:23–26
 - c. John 16:33

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Share the dominant emotion you remember when you experienced suffering.
2. Compile a list of common emotions that accompany pain and suffering.
3. Suggest reasons you have heard people give to explain human suffering.
4. Share a brief summary of the pain and suffering you experienced or witnessed that motivated interest in this series.

APPLICATION

1. Pray for individuals currently experiencing suffering.
2. Share one new insight gained from this session.
3. Describe your experience of growth through suffering.

2

Responding to Pain and Suffering

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

One of the most difficult aspects of pain and suffering is the uncertainty. The one enduring suffering finds it hard to live with the indefinite outcomes, wondering if life will ever return to “normal.” Those who try to comfort the suffering are beset with doubts about how to respond to the situation. This session expands on the first session’s treatment of the purpose of suffering: in seeking to provide helpful certainties to the one who suffers and practical guidance for those seeking to comfort the one in distress.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session you will:

1. Examine various Scriptures dealing with the purpose of pain and suffering.
2. Identify ways in which pain and suffering are valuable in human experience.
3. Contrast helpful and unhelpful responses to someone who is suffering.
4. Practice responding in a helpful way to someone else’s pain.

QUOTATION

If I hope in anything or anyone less than One who has power over death, I am doomed to final disappointment. Suffering will drive me to hopelessness. What character I have will disintegrate. It is the hope of Christ that makes us able to persevere in times of tribulation and distress. We have an anchor for our souls that rests in the One who has gone before us and conquered.

—R.C. Sproul

LECTURE OUTLINE

- A. The difficulty of responding to those who suffer
 - 1. Feelings of inadequacy
 - 2. Expectations that words provide answers
- B. Jesus' expectations of our response to suffering
 - 1. He does not want us to have a pat answer to difficult situations.
 - 2. He intends to provide comfort through us.
- C. Questions to answer
 - 1. Suppose you were called to the scene of a tragedy for someone you know.
 - a. How would you feel about speaking to the family?
 - b. What would you say or do?
 - 2. Imagine yourself in a situation of serious suffering. What would you want a friend or pastor to say to you or do for you?

STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1. From your experience and observation, what are the major concerns of those who endure suffering?
- 2. Are there differences between the suffering person's *felt* needs (desires) and the person's *real* needs?
- 3. What insights have you gained from this study of what should not be said to hurting individuals?
- 4. How can a person deal appropriately with feelings of anger, dismay, or discouragement?

BIBLE STUDY

- 1. Look up the following Scripture passages to discover insights about God's perspective on suffering and its purposes.
 - a. Genesis 50:20
 - b. Deuteronomy 32:3–4
 - c. Psalm 94:3–10
 - d. Ecclesiastes 3:1–13
 - e. John 9:1–11
 - f. John 1:33
 - g. Romans 8:18–21, 26–28
 - h. Hebrews 9:27
 - i. James 5:10–11
 - j. 1 Peter 2:19–24
- 2. What does Scripture present as the most helpful responses a person can make while suffering? Look up the following verses and record the principles discovered. How comfortable and competent do you feel to carry out these responses?

- a. Job 13:15
 - b. Psalm 23:4–6
 - c. Psalm 55:22
 - d. Psalm 73:23–26
 - e. Psalm 103:13–14
 - f. Isaiah 43:2
 - g. 1 Peter 1:6–7
 - h. 1 Peter 4:12–19
 - i. James 1:2–4
3. Select one of the responses made to Job’s plight. Identify whether that response was comforting or not, then write what that individual could have said or done to provide more comfort to Job.
- a. Job 2:8–13
 - b. Job 4:1–9
 - c. Job 22:1–3, 21–24
 - d. Job 42:7–11

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In James 5:14–16, the sick are told to call upon the elders of the church to anoint them with oil and lay hands on them. Should Christians today practice this?
2. What does the Bible teach us about comforting one who is suffering as a result of his or her own wrong actions? (Consider 2 Corinthians 1:3–5; 2:4–11.)
3. Share an incident when someone did or did not comfort you in a difficult time. Identify one reason why that person’s action was or was not helpful.
4. Make a list of possible outcomes of suffering that would make a person’s suffering more bearable.
5. Share something significant you have learned about yourself, about others or about God through experiencing your own or someone else’s suffering.

APPLICATION

1. Pray about dealing with suffering, expressing your trust in God and thankfulness for His presence “in the valley.”
2. Make a list of *dos* and *don’ts* in offering comfort to someone who suffers. Be as specific as possible in your ideas.
3. Practice talking with someone who is suffering. Select a specific case of suffering (someone in the group or someone you know) and suggest a comment you feel could be appropriate in that situation.
4. In what ways do your tone of voice, facial expression, and body language affect your words of comfort?

3

Suffering: A Divine Vocation

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

God is sovereign over suffering and death. He sometimes actually calls us to suffer and even to die. Throughout Scripture, we encounter people whose suffering was the necessary vehicle by which God was able to accomplish His purpose. This session examines three individuals who were called to suffer so that great benefits would result.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session you will:

1. Compare the benefits of suffering with those of pleasure.
2. Examine the suffering experiences of three biblical people.
3. Discover the most helpful response for a person who is called to suffer.
4. Describe situations in which you have seen God accomplish good through someone's suffering.

QUOTATION

Every one of us is called to die. That vocation is as much a calling from God as is a "call" to the ministry of Christ. Sometimes the call comes suddenly and without warning. Sometimes it comes with a notification in advance. But it comes to all of us. And it comes from God.

—R.C. Sproul

LECTURE OUTLINE

- A. Understanding God's vocation or call (from Latin). God calls certain people to suffer, at least for a portion of their life, and perhaps even to die.
- B. History of God's activity with people
1. Job: "Though he slay me, I will hope in him" (13:15).
 - a. Job's friends: "You are suffering because you sinned."
 - b. God: He did not answer Job's questions; instead He revealed Himself to Job in the questions He asked.
 2. Blind man (John 9)
 - a. Disciples' question: "Whose sin caused blindness?" Fallacy of false dilemma (either/or)—reducing choice to two options when other choices exist.
 - b. Jesus' answer: "Neither" —affliction's purpose is to show God's power.
 3. Jesus: the entire purpose for His birth and life was to live and die.
 1. "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death" (Matt. 26:38).
 2. The prophecy of Simeon (Luke 2:34–35)—foretelling suffering of His mother.
 3. His Father's business (Luke 2:49)—He was destined to die.
 4. Jesus' rebuke after Peter's insistence that He not suffer and die (Matthew 16:32–23).
 4. All the pain of human life was placed on Jesus.
- C. Conclusion
1. Suffering and death are at the heart of our faith.
 2. Thus: Let the suffering grieve as Jesus did in the garden (Matt. 26:36–44).
 - a. "Let this cup pass from me" (cup = His vocation.)
 - b. Jesus endured because He knew God had put Him there.
- D. Whenever God calls us to suffering and death, He always provides the means to endure.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why would a loving God call anyone to suffer?
2. If suffering and death can be a vocation, is it wrong to seek to avoid them and to pursue happiness in this life?
3. What do you think is the most difficult aspect of enduring suffering?
4. What do you think has been the most interesting concept dealt with in the series thus far?

BIBLE STUDY

1. Read Matthew 5:45; John 16:33; Acts 14:22; 1 Thessalonians 3:2–4. Why should we not be surprised when suffering and trouble enter our lives, either directly or indirectly?
2. Read 2 Corinthians 12:7–10. How can we know if certain suffering is a vocation to be lived through or an affliction to be cured?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Decide whether you agree or disagree with the statement, “Sorrow is better than laughter.” Explain why.
2. Read Ecclesiastes 7:2–4. Make a list of reasons the writer may have had in describing mourning as better than laughter. List reasons why such a view is hard for people to accept.
3. It is easy to see God’s purpose when a miracle occurs (Job’s losses are restored, the blind man sees, Jesus rises triumphant, etc.). How can His purpose be seen when there is no miracle?
4. The following factors are among the most difficult in any situation of suffering. What responses would be likely to provide the most comfort to the person who:
 - a. Feels isolated and abandoned (by God, by family and friends, by doctors/staff, etc.)?
 - b. Despairs over losing a major role in life (a man who is emasculated by cancer, a woman who is unable to care for family, a person unable to earn a living, etc.)?
 - c. Is unable to show emotion through tears, anger, etc.?
 - d. Cannot feel God’s presence in the midst of suffering?

APPLICATION

1. Describe situations in which you have seen God accomplish good through someone’s suffering.
2. Tell of one situation of suffering in which you find it difficult to see God’s purpose. Pray that you (or the person involved) will be able to trust and experience God’s presence in the problem.
3. What questions have been raised in your mind during this session?
 - a. What issues would you like dealt with more fully?
 - b. Give some thoughtful study to these questions before the next session.

4

Walking the Via Dolorosa

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

Our Savior was a suffering Savior. The uniform testimony of the Scriptures through messianic psalms, the prophecies of Isaiah, and the people and circumstances surrounding His birth are clear and compelling in their teaching that Jesus was born to suffer. This session expands on Session 3's consideration of the sufferings of Jesus and their implications for the sufferings we experience today.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session you will:

1. Evaluate some common assumptions about responding to suffering.
2. Study the implications of Jesus' suffering for someone who is coping with pain.
3. Describe their response if God should call them to suffer.
4. Suggest helpful responses to people in the midst of suffering.

QUOTATION

No one was ever called by God to greater suffering than that suffering to which God called His only begotten Son. Our Savior was a suffering Savior. He went before us into uncharted land of agony and death.

—R.C. Sproul

LECTURE OUTLINE

- A. All people desire to be treated with dignity.
- B. Suffering damages dignity.
 1. Hospital/jail severely threatens a person's dignity.
 2. Jesus' suffering involved an assault on His dignity.

3. Pain is not merely physical; dignity may be more vital to a person than blood.
4. Protection of human dignity is a priority in ministering to those who suffer.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why is honesty vital in facing suffering?
2. What insights have you gained about suffering from the first three sessions, or what experiences of this past week have raised any of the issues dealt with in the series?
3. Is it a lack of faith to pray, “If this be Your will”?

BIBLE STUDY

1. Read Colossians 1:24. What is the meaning of filling up “what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ”?
2. Look in the following Scriptures for insights about our response to suffering. Record your discoveries.
 - a. Isaiah 53
 - b. Matthew 16:15–27
 - c. Matthew 26:36–39
 - d. Luke 22:43–44
 - e. 1 Peter 4:12
 - f. Revelation 1:17–18
3. How do the following Psalms provide comfort to the person involved in suffering?
 - a. Psalm 6
 - b. Psalm 13
 - c. Psalm 18:1–6
 - d. Psalm 23
 - e. Psalm 28
 - f. Psalm 46
 - g. Psalm 61
 - h. Psalm 77
 - i. Psalm 88
 - j. Psalm 138
4. How does Jesus’ suffering (see Heb. 4:14–16) relate to someone today who is enduring these trials?
 - a. The loss of a loved one to disease or accident
 - b. Terminal illness
 - c. An uncomfortable and/or restricting physical handicap
 - d. The disintegration of a family
 - e. The loss of employment and economic security

5. In what ways could people in the above situations be helped by following Jesus' example in suffering?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What if we pray in faith and the expected healing does not come?
2. Can we expect to be healed if we have enough faith? Is absence of a healing evidence that faith was lacking?
3. Consider these statements, evaluating their helpfulness as advice in dealing with suffering.
 - a. There is a right way of coping with suffering and death that is better than other ways.
 - b. Everyone must be able to clearly express his or her faith in order to deal with suffering and impending death.
 - c. Christians shouldn't grieve, especially around the person who is suffering.
 - d. A person's negative feelings are wrong and should be discouraged.
 - e. Someone visiting a suffering person should help that person to feel better.

APPLICATION

1. Write an expression of gratitude to someone who took the opportunity to express their love and concern for you (or someone you love) when you were experiencing a difficult time.
2. Make a list of practical ways to support and encourage someone facing an extended period of illness or recovery.
3. Prepare a list of people currently enduring some type of suffering. What actions can you take to minister in these situations during the coming weeks?

5

Dying in Faith

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

While all people tend to wonder about the timing and the cause of death, Scripture leads us to ponder the ultimate question—the spiritual state of the person. This session focuses on the only two options available: we either die “in faith” or we die in our sins.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session you will:

1. Identify reasons people tend to fear death.
2. Consider illustrations of people who faced death.
3. Investigate Scriptures dealing with dying “in faith.”
4. Suggest appropriate steps to prepare for death.

QUOTATION

The Judge of all the earth cannot bring forth final justice without a final judgment. He insists that all human beings will be held accountable for their actions. If we are not ultimately accountable, then the only conclusion we can reach is that ultimately we don't count.

—R.C. Sproul

LECTURE OUTLINE

A. The ultimate questions

1. Not *if* we will die or *why* we will die
2. *When* and *how* we will die are the most significant concerns. Scripture is not interested in the method of death, but the state—the person's relationship to God.

B. Examples of people dying

1. R.C. Sproul's mother: "This is the happiest day of my life."
2. Tom Graham: "Died in faith" (a common Biblical epitaph)
3. Billy Graham's conversation with Jack Paar
4. R.C. Sproul's father: "I have fought the good fight" (2 Tim. 4:7)
 - a. Fight against illness is a good fight
 - b. Race—refers to endurance (marathon)
 - c. Kept the faith—not magic or superstition, but trust in God's person

C. Conclusion: The just live by faith and die in faith.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How honest should a family be when a person has a life-threatening illness? Who should be told the truth? Should anyone be shielded from the truth? Under what circumstances should the truth be held back?
2. What is the difference between faith and wishful thinking?
3. How does approaching death "in faith" differ from facing death without faith?
4. If someone has rejected Christ for a lifetime and then professes faith on his deathbed, will God accept that person as being "in faith"? Explain your answer.
5. "Putting my affairs in order" is usually a high priority for a person who knows death is near. Somehow, people find great satisfaction in a sense of completion, in knowing that they have not left things undone that should have been done. In light of this session, make a list of essential preparations a person should make before death.
6. How can I know that I am truly a Christian and will, in fact, die in faith? How do I know that extreme suffering may not cause me to lose the faith that I think I have? Is it possible for a true believer to lose the faith?
7. What do you say to someone without faith who is suffering?
8. Are there any relationships or circumstances you would have regrets about if you died today? What about them would cause regret?

BIBLE STUDY

1. Read the following Scriptures and record your insights as they relate to dying "in faith."
 - a. John 5:24
 - b. John 8:24
 - c. John 11:25–27
 - d. Romans 14:7–9
 - e. 1 Corinthians 15:12–19
 - f. 2 Corinthians 13:4–5

- g. 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18
- h. Hebrews 9:23–28
- i. Hebrews 11:13–16

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does your experience and observation support the comparison of facing death with fighting a good fight?
2. If you were to compare life to a long-distance race, how far along the course do you feel you have made it? What difference would it make if you knew the hardest part of the race was behind you? Ahead of you?
3. What do you feel is the hardest thing about enduring the approach of death over a long period of time?
4. If in a group, share experiences you have had in the past week as you have sought to help someone else who is enduring some type of suffering.

APPLICATION

1. Compile a list of reasons why people tend to fear death.
2. Evaluate each reason as to how fearsome it really is.
3. Read one or more obituary notices in your local newspaper or online. What would you expect to have been the emotional climate surrounding that person's death? Would it be considered tragic? Was it the culmination of a rich and full life? Was it unexpected?
4. Close with a time of prayer, focusing on those who are currently dealing with their own imminent death or the death of a loved one.

6

Perplexity and Despair

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

When pressure pushes on the borders of our ability to endure suffering and there seems no hope of relief, death is viewed as a welcome release. This session deals with these extremely difficult times, helping people gain a perspective on biblical principles for continuing to trust God in the severest trials of life.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session you will:

1. Discuss situations in which people feel overwhelmed by pressure and uncertainty.
2. Identify factors that contribute to feelings of despair and depression.
3. Examine Scriptures dealing with our responses when despair strikes.
4. Evaluate various ways to cope with despair.

QUOTATION

What is difficult to bear without Christ is made far more bearable with Christ. What is a heavy burden to carry alone becomes a far lighter burden to carry with His help. It is precisely the presence and help of Christ in times of suffering that makes it possible for us to stand up under pressure.

—John Owen

LECTURE OUTLINE

- A. Crucial question: Can a person in this life really be sure of going to heaven?
 1. Manifestations of arrogance
 - a. Claiming salvation by good works
 - b. Rejecting God's offer of eternal life

2. Common questions about the state of our own faith
 - a. Is my faith gone?
 - b. Can my faith withstand the pressures of suffering?

B. Questions to consider

1. When have you felt a void of personal assurance about how your life is going to turn out? When have there been times of strong assurance?
2. What kinds of things shake your confidence and disturb your assurance in the promises of God?

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are some factors that contribute to depression and frustration in those who suffer and in their loved ones?
2. What can be said to people who are suffering with illness or old age who would rather die and go to heaven than continue to live?
3. What does the Bible say about euthanasia?
4. Who should decide when to “pull the plug”?
5. How can extended suffering bring glory to God? (For example, the death of six million Jews during World War II.)
6. What do we say to believers with no feeling of comfort in their distress?

BIBLE STUDY

1. Examine the following Scriptures dealing with our responses to extreme suffering and pressure. Identify principles that are helpful in dealing with feelings of despair and uncertainty.
 - a. Psalm 27:13–14
 - b. Psalm 73:23–26
 - c. Matthew 11:28–30
 - d. 2 Corinthians 1:8–10
 - e. 2 Corinthians 4:8–15
 - f. 2 Corinthians 12:7–10
 - g. 1 Peter 1:6–9
 - h. 1 Peter 4:12–19

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Suggest some helpful ways to overcome despair in the most difficult situations of life.
2. What activities do you think are most helpful during times of suffering in enabling a person to keep his faith and maintain a positive outlook?
3. If in a group, share experiences you have had in the past week as you have sought to help someone else who is enduring some type of suffering.

APPLICATION

1. How does each of the following quotes relate to the points made in the previous session?
 - a. *If I were to choose between pain and nothing, I would choose pain.*

—William Faulkner
 - b. *It's not that I'm afraid to die; I just don't want to be there when it happens.*

—Woody Allen
 - c. *Once you accept your own death, all of a sudden you are free to live.*

—Saul Alinsky
 - d. *I have a new appreciation of things I once took for granted—eating lunch with a friend, scratching my cat Muffet's ears and listening for his purrs, the company of my wife, reading a book or magazine in the quiet of my bed late at night, raiding the refrigerator for a glass of orange juice or a slice of toast. For the first time, I think I actually am savoring life.*

—Oregon Sen. Richard Neuberger, when his cancer was diagnosed
 - e. *Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live.*

—Norman Cousins
 - f. *A dying man needs to die, as a sleepy man needs to sleep, and there comes a time when it is wrong, as well as useless, to resist.*

—Stewart Alsop
 - g. *He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.*

—Friedrich Nietzsche
 - h. *Be still prepared for death: and death or life shall thereby be the sweeter.*

—William Shakespeare
 - i. *Everyone desires to live long; but no one would be old.*

—Jonathan Swift
2. What are the reasons why some experiences result in feelings of hope, while others lead to despair? Record several experiences of hope and several experiences of despair and state the reasons why they lead to that result.
3. Describe an experience in which you or a loved one felt despair or the inability to cope with the pressures of a difficult situation. Try to describe the emotions that were involved in the situation and anything you found helpful in coping with those emotions.

7

Life After Death?

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

The ultimate question for all humanity is the one asked by Job: “If a man dies, will he live again?” This session explores some of the basic reasons people of all cultures have come to believe in life after death.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session you will:

1. Express reasons people hold to a belief in life after death.
2. Consider the philosophical and experiential support for a belief in life after death.
3. Read Scriptural passages dealing with life after death.
4. Discuss ways to comfort the dying and the grieving with the hope of life after death.

QUOTATION

*If the ultimate justice is to take place, then the first requirement that must be met is this:
We must survive the grave.*

—R.C. Sproul

LECTURE OUTLINE

- A. Ingrained human demand for continuity of personal existence (“If a man dies, shall he live again?” [Job 14:14])
 1. Hamlet’s dilemma: “To be or not to be—aye there’s the rub.”
 - a. We would rather bear the ills we know than venture to those we don’t.
 - b. This makes cowards of us all.
 1. For the individual approaching death
 2. For those accompanying the dying

2. Death of Socrates—comforting speculation
3. Immanuel Kant: “If there is no life after death, then is this life meaningless?”
4. Holocaust
 - a. If there is no God, there can be no moral evil in the Holocaust, for human life would be meaningless.
 - b. For something to be tragic, there first has to be value—a foundation for ultimate meaning.

B. Our greatest comfort

1. The teaching of Jesus (His words)
2. The examples of Jesus (His work)

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does awareness of life after death enhance our ability to endure suffering?
2. How does awareness of life after death affect our awareness of purpose in suffering and death?
3. How would you respond to someone who contends that belief in life after death is a crutch or the “opiate of the masses”?
4. Have people who have reported experiences of dying and returning to life really had a glimpse of life after death?
5. What does the Bible say is the fate of a baby who dies in infancy, is stillborn, or is aborted?

BIBLE STUDY

1. The Old Testament does not contain many strong, clear statements about life after death. However, it was a question that people raised, and there are many places where the light of the New Testament statements brings a clearer focus to ancient statements. The New Testament Scriptures on life after death will be studied in session 9.

Read these Old Testament passages that deal with life after death. Record and discuss the insights you gain from each passage.

- a. Genesis 5:24
- b. 1 Samuel 2:6
- c. Job 7:6–10
- d. Job 14:14
- e. Psalms 6:5
- f. Psalms 16:9–11
- g. Psalms 37:27–29
- h. Psalms 49:10–15
- i. Psalms 88:9–12
- j. Ecclesiastes 9:10

- k. Isaiah 38:18
- l. Isaiah 60:15–16
- m. Isaiah 65:17–19
- n. Isaiah 66:22

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you think the fear of separation from loved ones is hardest for the one dying or the ones who remain? Why? Discuss your answers.
2. What is one insight about life after death that you have gained from this session?
3. Recall an incident when you had to let go of a loved one. Why was it hard? What factors produced comfort for you?

APPLICATION

1. Create a list of various ways in which people try to discern the future. You may include various occult and folk methods as well as scientific efforts to forecast weather, the economy, elections, fashion trends, personal health, and well being. What do you think are some reasons many people seek to predict future events?
2. What are some reasons why a belief in life after death is important to people? What are some examples of wishful thinking about life after death that you have heard from people (for example, the departed golfer whose friends talked about him having gone to “that perfect golf course in the sky”)? How can we find out if a belief in life after death is just wishful thinking or based on actual reality?
3. Pray for those who are approaching death and for those who are grieving the loss of a loved one.

8

The Resurrection of Christ

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

To rise above speculation about life after death, we must turn our attention to the words and experiences of Jesus. Not only was the concept of life beyond the grave at the core of His teaching message, but His own bodily resurrection and appearance to hundreds of people forms the cornerstone of the Christian faith.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session you will:

1. Identify the logical conclusion of viewing death as final.
2. Discover Jesus' statements about life after death.
3. Examine Paul's convictions that there is a resurrection of the dead.
4. Affirm personal faith in Jesus' triumph over death.

QUOTATION

One of the most difficult dimensions a person experiences at the approach of death is the troubling knowledge that the journey must be made alone, without human companionship. We can hold their hand and they can hold ours. But a moment comes when separation takes place. It is that separation, however temporary, that distresses our spirits.

—R.C. Sproul

LECTURE OUTLINE

- A. Nihilism as a worldview
 1. Edgar Allan Poe's ideal poem: "The Raven"
 - a. Should incite the soul beyond the cognitive
 - b. Ideal length? 100 lines

- c. Deepest emotion possible? Grief.
 - d. When is grief experienced? At the death of a loved one.
 - e. What is the deepest form of grief? Loss of unconsummated love (new bride).
 - f. Saddest sounds? “O-U-R” (bride’s name: Lenore).
 - g. Worst word to express this thought? *Nevermore*.
 - h. Worst setting for grief? Solitude.
 - i. Object/animal for character to interact with? Raven.
 - j. He composed the first and last verses, then filled in the rest.
2. Conclusion: Total despair

B. Judeo-Christian worldview

1. People in the first century were no more naive about death than they are today—people stayed dead then, just as they do now.
2. 1 Corinthians 15—Paul’s if/then conditional logic
 - a. If there is no resurrection, then Christ did not rise.
 - b. If Christ is not raised, then:
 1. Our preaching and faith is useless. (The cornerstone of Christian faith is not “love one another” but “He is risen!”)
 2. We are false witnesses.
 3. Those who have died are lost.
 - c. If all we have is this life, then we are to be pitied.
 - d. If there is no resurrection, then we should eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die (hedonism).
 1. Kant: If there is no life after death, then there is no basis for justice or ethics and life is meaningless.
 2. Dostoevsky: If there is no life after death, then existence is intolerable, a cosmic joke.
 3. Nietzsche: Life *is* meaningless
3. 1 Corinthians 1—Paul’s evidence
 - a. Christ was raised according to Scripture.
 - b. He appeared to Peter, the Twelve, the five hundred, James, the Apostles, and Paul. (“For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty” [2 Peter 1:16]).
4. 1 Corinthians 15—Paul’s conclusion: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (15:58).

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How do you respond to Poe’s analysis of solitary grief being so painful?
2. When have you experienced grief alone?
3. When have you grieved with the support of friends or family?

4. Why should anyone consider Paul's accounts of the resurrection any more reliable than stories of reincarnation by Shirley MacLaine and others?
5. Respond to this passage written in 1846 by Simon Greenleaf, author of *A Treatise on the Law of Evidence* and one of the foremost legal scholars of the nineteenth century:

The great truths which the apostles declared were . . . asserted . . . in the face of the most appalling terrors that can be presented to the mind of man. Their master had recently perished as a malefactor. . . . The interest and passions of all the rulers and great men in the world were against them. . . . Propagating this new faith, even in the most inoffensive and peaceful manner, they could expect nothing but contempt . . . bitter persecution . . . and death. Yet this faith they jealously did propagate; and all these miseries they endured undismayed, nay rejoicing. As one after another was put to a miserable death, the survivors only prosecuted their work with increased vigor and resolution. . . . They had every possible motive to review carefully the grounds of their faith . . . and these motives were pressed upon their attention with the most melancholy and terrific frequency. It was therefore impossible that they could have persisted in affirming the truths they have narrated, had not Jesus actually risen from the dead, and had they not known this fact as certainly as they knew any other fact. . . . If then their testimony was not true, there was no possible motive for its fabrication.

BIBLE STUDY

1. Look up the following Scriptures and record any assertions about life after death you find.
 - a. Matthew 28:5–9
 - b. Mark 12:24–27
 - c. John 11:23–26
 - d. John 14:1–3
 - e. 1 Corinthians 15:1–20
 - f. 2 Corinthians 5:1–8

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why can you trust Jesus' promise in John 14:1–3?
2. Imagine a bouquet of flowers. Why are they commonly displayed at a funeral?
3. List the reasons you believe that people who die "in faith" really do live with Christ.
4. If in a group, share any personal, present experience in coping with suffering and or loss.

APPLICATION

1. Write a personal statement of affirmation about the resurrection of Jesus, including why that belief is important to you.
2. Describe one new insight about the resurrection that you gained as a result of this session or a truth you already knew that seems especially meaningful at this time.
3. Pray for those facing death and those grieving over the loss of a loved one.

The Resurrection and the Fear of Death

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

The resurrection of Jesus Christ provides the anchor for the soul in life's severest tempests. It also provides the basis for discovering the ultimate meaning of any struggle carried on in Christ's name. This session explores the ways His resurrection ensures that our labor, our pain, our suffering, and even our dying are not in vain.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session you will:

1. Share some of the experiences in dealing with grief.
2. Identify ways in which the resurrection of Jesus provides support in facing death today.
3. Suggest practical ideas for dealing with the fear of death.
4. Discuss helpful approaches in dealing with grief.

QUOTATION

At the moment of death, fear and doubt can assault the heart and press hard against our faith. It is at that moment that we must hear the words of Jesus, "Trust Me."

—R.C. Sproul

LECTURE OUTLINE

- A. The circumstances that provoked Jesus to weep
 1. Jesus' friend Lazarus had died.
 2. Jesus clearly knew of His resurrection and His power over death.
 3. Jesus entered into the pain of the situation.

B. Confusion among Christians about emotions

1. Scripture disapproves of destructive emotions.
 - a. Bitterness
 - b. Self-pity
2. Scripture portrays grief as perfectly legitimate.
 - a. Grief is only wrong if it turns into bitterness or self pity.
 - b. Do not be ashamed to grieve.

C. Questions to consider

1. Have you gone through situations where you felt you were not allowed to grieve?
2. How do you feel when someone else is mourning? Do you want the person to contain their grief or express it? Why?

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Respond to the contention that belief in resurrection is a desperate effort to avoid facing death as final.
2. How does knowing that Jesus rose from death bring comfort to a person confronting death today? (See 1 Corinthians 15:42–44; 50–58.)
3. In light of Jesus' teaching about life after death, why should a believer cry over the passing of a Christian loved one?
4. What are some practical actions a person can take to help someone else who is grieving?
5. Is a belief in reincarnation compatible with Christian teaching about a resurrection?
6. How can a Christian deal with the fear of death?
7. What are some practical actions a person can take to deal with grief?

BIBLE STUDY

1. Examine these Scriptures about mourning. Write down the insights you gain from them about expressing grief at the death of a loved one.
 - a. Genesis 23:2
 - b. 2 Samuel 3:31–32
 - c. Ecclesiastes 3:4
 - d. Matthew 5:4
 - e. Romans 12:15
 - f. 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18
 - g. Revelation 21:4

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe your experiences and/or observations of dealing with grief after the death of a loved one.

2. Write down at least one question about the resurrection you would ask if you could meet one of the eyewitnesses to the risen Jesus.
3. Recall an incident in which you were afraid until someone you trusted came on the scene.

APPLICATION

1. Select specific actions to take in the coming weeks to minister to grieving loved ones, friends, and neighbors.
2. If in a group, discuss the possibility of working together to provide comfort and support to someone dealing with grief.
3. Write out 1 Corinthians 15:51–54, personalizing it with your own name (in place of *we*, put your name in the sentence, etc.). For the group: After everyone has finished writing, form into pairs and exchange papers with your partner. Each partner then reads aloud the verses with the other person's name, affirming to one another the personal hope of resurrection.
4. Grief is often made more difficult by regrets over gratitude not expressed or reconciliations not effected. Identify at least one person whose death would cause you to regret leaving some important words unsaid. Plan to write or talk to such person(s) in the next week to share your thoughts and feelings.
5. Pray for those facing death or grieving the loss of a loved one.

What Is Heaven Like?

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

The Bible is somewhat oblique about what heaven is like. We are given many hints that provide a tantalizing foretaste of future glory and a few points that are revealed with utmost clarity. This session examines the biblical descriptions of our next world.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session you will:

1. Identify common expectations of what heaven will be like.
2. Consider philosophical and literary views of heaven.
3. Examine assertions made in the Gospels and Epistles about heaven.
4. Discuss the impact of heaven on dealing with suffering and grief.

QUOTATIONS

The first lesson we learn about heaven is that life in heaven is better than life on earth.

—R.C. Sproul

LECTURE OUTLINE

- A. Scripture offers few details on the subject of heaven.
 1. There will be a radical change in our nature. Paul uses Plato's analogy of a seed "sown in dishonor."
 2. There will be continuity of personal identity.
- B. Pascal describes humans as beings of highest grandeur and lowest misery.
 1. Grandeur is shown in our ability to imagine a better life.

2. Misery is shown in our inability to create such a life.
 - a. No one is ever one hundred percent satisfied with life.
 - b. Imagining the most wonderful state possible and extending it forever.
- C. Scriptural glimpses into heaven (Apocalypse/Revelation)
1. John is commanded to write the vision (Rev. 21:5) because:
 - a. It is true and faithful.
 - b. It will benefit those who experience it.
 2. “The sea was no more” (21:1).
 - a. No chaos, no threat
 - b. Jewish symbolism uses the sea as a source of enemies and storms, a symbol of chaos and darkness.
 1. Genesis 1:2—“Darkness was over the face of the deep.”
 2. Psalm 46:3—“Though its waters roar and foam”
 - c. River is the positive image—fresh vs. salt water (22:1–2).
 3. “God himself will be with them” (21:3).
 - a. Human life is predominantly marked by the absence of a sense of God’s presence (a foretaste).
 - b. Heaven will be marked by God’s continuing presence.
 4. “He will wipe away every tear” (21:4).
 - a. This is the deepest gesture of intimacy, conveying caring and understanding.
 - b. There will be no more reason for sadness (no more death or sickness).
 5. “I am making all things new” (21:5).
 6. Measurements are symbolic.
 7. No temple, sun, moon (21:22–23)
 - a. “For the glory of God gives it light.”
 - b. “It’s lamp is the lamb.”
 8. We shall see His face (22:4).
 9. Conclusion
 - a. The sufferings of this world are not worthy to be compared to the joys of heaven.
 - b. Death is the gateway to paradise.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Who goes to heaven?
2. Where is heaven? What will we do there?
3. What will be the ultimate end of this world?
4. If heaven is the ultimate destination for the Christian, why is it described so little in the Bible?

5. Did believing Jews in the Old Testament go to heaven or was there a “waiting room” for them until after Jesus’ death and resurrection?
6. When we die, do we immediately go to heaven?

BIBLE STUDY

1. Read the familiar opening of the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:2) and consider the implications of God’s will being done on earth in the same way that it is carried out in heaven. Then write about one action you know (from your study of Scripture) that God desires, and describe how you will seek to carry out His will in that way in the coming week.
2. Browse through a hymnal to find descriptions indicating what the writers of hymns expect heaven to be like.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When a person is dealing with suffering or grief, what is the impact of knowledge about what heaven is like?
2. What truth about heaven do you think brings the most encouragement to a person who is suffering or grieving?
3. If in a group, share experiences from the past week of helping someone deal with suffering or grief.

APPLICATION

1. Compile a list of expectations you have for what heaven will be like. (If in a group, work together to create a common list.)
2. Compile a list of common expectations people in our society have about what heaven will be like.

An Inside Look at Heaven

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

The promise of Scripture is that no affliction endured in this life is worthy to be compared with the glory God has prepared for us in heaven. The book of Revelation gives us a vivid and dramatic portrayal of this ultimate goal of the child of God who suffers and grieves today.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session you will:

1. Share experiences in which a desired goal provided meaningful encouragement.
2. Examine the Apostle John's vision of heaven in Revelation 21.
3. Discuss the present benefits of a clear view of heaven as the believer's goal.
4. Express gratitude for acts and words of encouragement you have received.

QUOTATION

The chief feature of the New Jerusalem is the immediate presence of God. God is in the midst of His people. He dwells with them. No longer is God seen as distant, remote from everyday experience. He pitches His tent in the midst of His people.

—R.C. Sproul

LECTURE OUTLINE

- A. Revelation: the greatest moment of splendor
 1. The beatific vision (vision of blessedness)
 2. When we see God's face, we shall be like Him.

B. Why we cannot see God now

1. Garden of Eden—a visual awareness of God
2. The fall—dropped a veil between us and God
 - a. God is invisible to us, not because He is a spirit.
 - b. The problem is not with our eyes but with our heart.
3. The Beatitudes—the pure in heart shall see God

C. Our present condition and future hope

1. Augustine: “Oh God, Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.”
2. Existentialists: Nagging human condition of anxiety
3. We will never be fulfilled until we see Him as He is.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Will we recognize each other in heaven?
2. Are the scriptural references to crowns meant to represent rewards for Christians?
3. Are there gradations in heaven whereby one Christian, as a result of greater obedience and good works, will enjoy more of God’s blessings and rewards than another?
4. What difference does it make to us today to learn what heaven will be like?
5. How literally are we to take the biblical portrayals of hell as a place for those who die outside of Christ?

BIBLE STUDY

1. How literal are the depictions of heaven in Revelation 21 and 22?
2. Read Revelation 21:1–22:5. What feature in this visual depiction has the greatest appeal as you look forward to experiencing God’s ultimate provision?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe an experience in which a desired goal enabled you to maintain a positive attitude and exert effort in the face of difficult circumstances.
2. If you could be granted one quick glimpse of heaven, who or what would you most want to see?
3. What is one insight you have gained through this series that has already been significant to you?
4. How have the principles shared in this series affected your ability to deal with suffering and death?

APPLICATION

1. What aspect of heaven is most appealing to you now? Why?
2. To what extent do you feel your attachment to this world is clouding your view of heaven?
3. Join in a hymn of praise for God's lovingkindness and continuing presence in times of great difficulty.
4. If in a group, express publicly your gratitude to a member who has done something encouraging during the series. It may have been a helpful action, a thoughtful word, and insightful comment or question—anything that benefitted others in the group.

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