

The Suffering of Christ and the Sovereignty of God

by John Piper

The universe exists to display the greatness of the glory of God's grace, and suffering is an essential part of this display.

Duration: 44:27

Scripture: Psalm 34:8, Psalm 103:1, Matthew 6:33, 2 Corinthians 5:15, 1 Peter 1:4, Revelation 5:9, Revelation 13:8

Topics: "Sovereignty Of God", "Christ's Suffering"

Description

In this sermon, Pastor John Piper explores the purpose of suffering and the glory of God. He begins by stating that the entire universe exists to display the greatness of God's grace. He supports this claim by referencing Ephesians 1:4-6, which speaks of God choosing and adopting believers for His purpose. Piper then turns to the book of Revelation, specifically chapter 13 verse 8, to further emphasize the ultimate biblical explanation for suffering. He concludes by urging listeners to find freedom from discouragement, self-pity, fear, and greed by focusing on the glory of Christ in His suffering.

Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from Desiring God is available at www.DesiringGod.org What I would like to do in our final session together is to magnify Christ in His suffering. And in that process, I would like to venture what I believe is the ultimate Biblical explanation for the existence of suffering.

I'd like to do it in a way that would free us from the paralyzing effects of discouragement and self-pity and fear and greed. I would like us, rather, to be free to spend ourselves, able or disabled, to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things, including suffering, for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. So I want to begin with some big statements, and then move to Bible, and then end with the celebration of the glories of Christ.

Some big statements. I believe that the entire universe exists to display the greatness of the glory of the grace of God. I might have said it a tad more simply.

I might have simply said, the entire universe exists in order to display the greatness of the glory of God. That's absolutely true. But the Bible is more specific than that.

The Bible makes plain that the greatest display of the glory of God is the display of the glory of His grace. And therefore, the ultimate aim of all things, the ultimate aim and final explanation of all that is, is that it exists to display the greatness of the glory of the grace of God. God decreed from all eternity to display the greatness of the glory of His grace for the enjoyment of His creatures.

And then He revealed to us that the ultimate aim and the explanation of why sin and suffering exist is this. This display. Why does sin exist? Why does suffering exist? And especially, why does a suffering Savior exist? And the answer is, for the display of the glory of the grace of God.

The coming of Jesus Christ into the world to die and suffer for undeserving sinners is the supreme manifestation of the greatness of the glory of the grace of God. Or to say it a little differently, the death of Christ in His supreme suffering is the highest, clearest, surest display of the glory of the grace of God that is possible or conceivable. Now, if that's so, then a stunning truth emerges from Scripture.

Namely, that suffering is an essential part of the created universe in which the greatness of the glory of the grace of God is to be displayed most fully. Suffering is an essential part of the tapestry of the universe so that the weaving of the grace of God will be seen in all of the fullness of its glory. Let me put it most simply and most starkly.

The ultimate reason that suffering exists in the universe is so that God might display the greatness of the glory of the grace of God by the suffering of Christ in Himself to deliver us from suffering. The suffering of the utterly innocent, infinitely holy Son of God in the place of utterly undeserving sinners to bring us everlasting joy is the greatest display of the glory of God's grace that ever was or ever could be or ever could be conceived. In conceiving a universe in which to display the glory of God's grace to the fullest, God did not choose Plan B. This was the moment, Good Friday, this was the moment for which everything in the universe was planned.

There could be no greater display of the glory of the grace of God than what happened at Calvary. Everything leading to it, everything flowing from it is explained by it, including all the suffering in the universe. Now those are the big statements.

Now what I would like you to do is walk with me on a biblical pathway that taught me that. I want you to see that from the Bible and not just from me. Up till now, perhaps it just may sound like high sounding theology or philosophy.

That is not what it is. It is what the Bible clearly teaches. Let's begin in Revelation.

If you have a Bible, I invite you to go to several places with me, including this one. Let's go to Revelation 13, verse 8. It's not surprising that we would go to the last book to find out the point of the beginning and the whole. That's the way last books function.

Revelation 13, verse 8. Not a common verse to think about, but filled with amazing implications. Revelation 13, 8. Read it from the English Standard Version. In this case, it is a very good, literal, careful, helpful translation.

All who dwell on earth will worship him that is the beast. Everyone whose name is not written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the lamb that was slain. That's an amazing verse.

It means that before the world was created, there was a book. The book of life of the lamb who was slain. The lamb, of course, is Jesus Christ crucified.

The book is the book of Jesus Christ crucified. Therefore, before God made the world, he had in view Jesus Christ slain. And he had in view a people written in the book, purchased by the blood of the slain lamb.

Therefore, the suffering of Jesus was not an afterthought as though the creation did not go the way God planned it to go. Before the foundation of the world, God had a book called the book of life of the lamb who was slain. That's the name of the book.

From all eternity, he had a book of life of the lamb who was slain. The slaying of the lamb was in view from the beginning of God. And he had no beginning.

Now go with me to 2 Timothy chapter 1 verse 9. 2 Timothy chapter 1 verse 9. Paul looks back into eternity before the ages began and he says, God saved us and called us to a holy calling. Not because of our works, but because of his own purpose and grace which he gave us. He gave us this grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.

Now what is grace? Grace is undeserved favor. Favor toward sinners is the meaning of grace. In Christ Jesus, God gave us this grace before the ages began.

We hadn't been created yet. We had not yet existed so that we could sin to become undeserving of this grace. But God had already decreed that grace, an in-Christ kind of grace, a blood-bought kind of grace, a sin-overcoming kind of grace would come to us in Jesus Christ.

All of that before the foundation of the world. So there is a book of life of the Lamb who was slain. And there is blood-bought, sin-overcoming grace flowing to undeserving sinners who are not yet created.

Now don't miss the magnitude of the word slain. The Lamb who was slain. It's only used in the New Testament by the writer of the book of Revelation, John.

Only John, in his Gospel and Revelation, used this word. It means slaughter. It's what you do to a lamb.

You slit the lamb's throat. It is not a sweet word. It is a gross word.

So, the Lamb who was slaughtered. So here we have suffering. This is suffering.

Slaughter of the Son of God in the mind and in the plan of God before the foundation of the world. The Lamb of God will suffer. He will be slaughtered.

This is the plan from all eternity. Now why? I'll give you the text for why in just a moment. But let me say it and then give you the text.

It's because the aim of creation is the fullest, clearest, surest display of the greatness of the glory of the grace of God. That's why. This was the plan.

Because creation was to most fully, most clearly, most surely display the apex of the glory of God in His grace. That's why this is the plan. The slaughter of the Son of God infinitely deserving for infinitely undeserving sinners like us.

That's the plan. Now let's go to Ephesians chapter 1. To see the ultimate statements of the Bible. These are the most ultimate statements of the reason for creation and redemption.

Ephesians 1 leaves no doubt where everything is going and why it is going there. And then we're going to look at a second support for this point from Revelation 5. First Ephesians 1 verse 4 through 6. God chose us in Him. That is in Christ.

Before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before Him in love. He predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ. So now you've got chosen in Him and adopted through Him.

According to the purpose of His will. And here's the most ultimate statement of why all things exist. Unto the praise of the glory of His grace.

Those are not my words. The goal of the entire history of redemption is to bring about a display and in response to the display praise to the glory of the grace of God. So plain.

It's so plain. But notice what may not be as quickly plain but on reflection is plain. Twice in these verses the plan to bring praise to the glory of the grace of God is related to Christ before the foundation of the world.

Verse 4. God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to bring about the praise of the glory of His grace. And then verse 5. He predestined our adoption through Christ before the foundation of the world to the praise of the glory of His grace. What does it mean that you were chosen in Christ? Or that our adoption was to happen through Christ? Well, we know from the mind of Paul, expressed for example in Galatians 5, 4. No, 4, 5. That our adoption was rooted in Christ's death as a redeemer.

He redeemed us that we might be adopted. Our adoption could not happen without the blood shedding of the Lamb slain. Therefore, what Paul means is that he chose us in Christ and he made a plan to adopt us through Christ because the plan was the suffering of Christ on our behalf that warranted our election and our adoption.

He had Christ in view, slain, a redeemer. And it was in the Redeemer that he chose us and in the Redeemer that he adopted us. And therefore, we now know what the goal of all of that was because it's so plainly said in verse 6. It is unto the praise of the glory of His grace.

Let's go to Revelation chapter 5. Here in Revelation 5, 9 to 12, the hosts of heaven are worshiping the Lamb. Why? What is it about the Lamb that is the centerpiece of eternal heavenly worship? It is because He was slaughtered. It is so plain.

Let's start reading at verse 9, Revelation 5. And they sang a new song saying, Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals. I think that means you are worthy to be the one who opens the final chapters of history. And brothers and sisters, do you not sense we may be near? I mean, how many earthquakes do there have to be before we read Matthew 24 in a certain way? Let me start over.

Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals. For you were slain. You were slain.

That's why we are worshiping you and calling you worthy. And by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. I'm dropping to verse 11.

Then I looked and I heard around the throne, dropping to the end of verse 11, myriads and myriads and thousands and thousands saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. The hosts of heaven focus their worship not simply on Christ, but Christ slaughtered, Christ suffering, Christ made miserable. And they are still singing it in Revelation 15.3. And therefore we can conclude that the centerpiece of heavenly worship, the worship of the age to come that will last forever and ever and ever, the centerpiece of the worship will be the Lamb slain, Christ slaughtered.

The suffering and the death of Jesus will never be forgotten. It will never be forgotten. It will be exalted.

It will be the centerpiece in the crown jewels of all the demonstrations of grace. It is the highest, clearest, surest display of the grace of God. And therefore it had to be in order to achieve the Ephesians 1.6 purpose of creation under the praise of the glory of the grace of God, namely the Lamb slain as the perfect being for absolutely undeserving creatures.

It doesn't and it cannot get any greater. Everything else is subordinate to this plan. Everything else is in place for the sake of this plan.

The display of the greatness of the glory of the grace of God and the suffering of the beloved is the goal of creation. Do you see what this implies about sin and suffering coming into existence? According to this divine plan, God permits sin to enter the world. God ordains what He hates to come to pass.

I'm leaning heavily now on Mark Talbot. He said this so plainly, so helpfully. It is not sinful in God that He will that sin be.

We do not need to fathom this mystery. Perhaps the best thing we can do is take the truth of the Joseph story that was unfolded for us where Joseph says to his brothers, you meant it for evil but God meant it, the evil, for good and lay that over the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve, you meant this for evil.

You turned your back on your Father, Creator, Treasure and you chose an apple over the glory of God. You meant it for evil. But oh, Adam and Eve, what a good God planned through your evil.

What a beautiful display of the glory of the grace of God was planned through the entrance of sin and suffering into this world. You meant it for evil and you fell. But God meant this fall for good.

You have not undone His plan. You sold yourselves for an apple like Joseph's brothers sold him in slavery. You have fallen.

And just as Joseph and God and the brothers set the stage for the salvation of Israel in Egypt, so Adam and Eve set the stage for the display of the greatness of the glory of the grace of God in the Redeemer. Not only did sin enter the world, that's not enough. The plan has to have more.

Suffering entered the world. Horrible, horrible suffering. Paul tells us how to understand this in Romans 8.20-23. I'll read it for you.

The creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of the will of Him who subjected it in hope. In other words, God, in response to the entrance of sin into the world, cursed creation. He subjected it to futility, to corruption, to bondage, to decay, in the hope that the creation itself would be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glory of the children of God.

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth. Every time you see an earthquake, think labor pains. Groaning, the whole creation is groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

And not only the creation, but we ourselves, even we who have the firstfruits of the Holy Spirit, groan inwardly waiting our adoption, the redemption of our bodies. When sin entered the world, horrible, horrible things followed. Diseases, birth defects, disabilities, natural catastrophes, human atrocities from the youngest infant to the oldest codger and from the most vile person to the sweetest saint.

Suffering is no respecter of persons. You can't look at Jesus on the cross and think that you will be spared. That's why he says, and I think the pronouns are emphasized because it's so hard for the Christians to believe this, verse 23, Romans 8, We ourselves, even we who have the firstfruits of the Holy Spirit, yes, even we groan inwardly as we wait our adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

Ezekiel tells us God does not delight in this suffering. Ezekiel 33, 11, As I live, declares the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked. But the plan remains.

And we get a glimpse into the mysterious complexity of the mind of God from Lamentations 3. We sang it, at least part of it. Lamentations 3, 32-33 goes like this, Though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love. For he does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men.

The word willingly in that verse is a paraphrase of the Hebrew collapse of three words, melevo, me, from, leiv, heart, o, his. He does not afflict us from his heart. But he does.

The plan stays, though God does not from the bottom of his heart delight in what he ordains. The stage is now set. The drama of redemptive history begins to unfold.

Sin is in full and deadly force. Suffering and death are present and ready to consume the Son of God when he comes. All things are now in place for the greatest possible display of the glory of the grace of God.

Therefore, in the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son, born of a virgin, born under the law. Every dimension of what he accomplished for us, every dimension of what he accomplished for us, he accomplished by suffering. No other way.

Nothing that we will ever enjoy forever and ever comes to us any other way than by the suffering of our Savior. The Son of God infinitely deserving of not suffering. For people infinitely deserving of suffering.

Suffering exists so that Christ might display the greatness of the glory of the grace of God by entering into it suffering himself that he might, by grace, deliver us from everlasting suffering. Everything, everything that Christ accomplished for sinners, he accomplished by suffering. And so I want to move to the end by telling you what he accomplished for you by suffering.

And I'm going to underline over and over and over again this has come to you by one means only the slaughter and suffering and death of the only being who has ever existed on earth who should not have been slaughtered. There are seven things he's done for you. One, Christ absorbed the wrath of God on your behalf and did it by suffering.

Galatians 3.13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. For it is written, Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree. The wrath of God that should have caused our eternal suffering was absorbed by Christ on the cross.

This is the glory of grace and it could only come by suffering. Number two, Christ bore our sins and purchased our forgiveness and he did it by suffering. 1 Peter 2.24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.

Isaiah 53.5 He was wounded for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The sins that should have crushed us with the weight of our guilt were transferred onto the only innocent being that has ever lived.

This is the glory of grace and it could only happen through suffering. Number three, Christ provided a perfect righteousness for us that becomes ours in him and he did it by suffering. Philippians 2.7-8 He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, being found in human form.

He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death. Yes, even death on the cross. The obedience of Jesus Christ by which many are accounted righteous could only happen by suffering and death.

This is the glory of the grace of God and it can only happen by suffering. Number four, Christ defeated death and he did it by suffering death. Hebrews 2.14 Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise took on the same nature that through death he might defeat the one who has the power of death and deliver all those who through fear of death had been held in lifelong bondage.

Oh, death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin. The power of sin is the law. But thanks be to the law fulfilling Christ, sin is defeated, law is fulfilled, sting is removed.

This is the glory of the grace of God and it is only possible because suffering exists in the world at Calvary. Number five, He disarmed Satan. Oh, some of you oppressed, bedraggled Satan, beat up people, listen carefully.

He disarmed Satan and he did it by suffering. Colossians 2.14 The record of debts against us. And there is a big one.

The record of debts against us. He set aside, nailing it to the cross. This is his Father nailing our debts.

Picture it. Nailing our debts. This is His Son nailing our debts to the cross.

And He thus disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to an open shame by triumphing over them in Him. Now, how did that work? It worked like this. Satan has one damning weapon and only one.

And it isn't possession or fiery darts or deception. He has one damning weapon. Unforgiven sin with which he can accuse us.

That's the only thing that sends anybody to hell. Seeing green things on your roof at night and hearing voices and watching furniture move does not threaten your soul. Only unforgiven sin threatens your soul and that He nailed to the cross.

This is the glory of the grace of God. And this deliverance from this demonic power is only possible because suffering is in the world at Calvary. Number six.

Christ purchased perfect final healing for all God's people and He did it by suffering. Isaiah 53, verse 4. Upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace. And with His stripes we are healed.

The Lamb in the midst of the throne I'm reading from Revelation 7. The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd and He will guide them to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. The Lamb slain together with the Father wipe all tears away. All our healing has been infallibly and completely purchased by the sufferings and the death of Jesus.

We do not get the whole inheritance in this life but we do get it and this is the glory of the grace of God and it is possible only through suffering. Number seven and finally. Christ will bring us finally to God and He will do it by His suffering.

1 Peter 3, verse 18. Christ also suffered once for sins the righteous for the unrighteous that He might bring us to God. God is the Gospel.

In the end, all the other gifts are means to this. He brings us to God. This is the apex of the glory of God and it is possible only because of suffering.

The ultimate purpose, therefore, I conclude. The ultimate purpose of the universe is to display the greatness of the glory of the grace of God. And that is found in the death and suffering of His Son.

The ultimate reason that suffering exists in the universe is so that Christ might display the greatness of the glory of the grace of God in Himself as He suffers overcoming our suffering. That we might bring praise to the glory of the grace of God forever. So Christian, O conference attending Christian, may I with all my heart underline what Johnny Erickson Tata and Carl Ellison, David Powelson and Mark Talbot and Steve St. all in their own way have said.

Have they not test this? May I exhort you with them whether you are able or disabled, enduring loss or delighting in friends, suffering pain or savoring pleasure. May I exhort you to embrace the truth that in Christ Jesus immeasurable riches are yours. You have so much to live for.

Don't waste yours. Instead, savor the riches that you have in Christ. Spend yourself at any cost and spread these riches to a desperately needy world.

What more can He say than to you He hath said. To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled. Oh that I had a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise.

Well, we do have a thousand tongues. And I pray, oh God, that as we give vent to our praise, you would be pleased because of the suffering of your Son to receive it in its imperfection and bring us toward the day when all our half-heartedness will be taken away. Thank you for listening to this message by John Piper, pastor for preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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