Walking with God through Pain and Suffering

or

Developing a Christian Theology of Suffering

Park Street Church
Fall 2016
TIMOTHY KELLER

Walking with God through Pain and Suffering
Tentative Schedule

Oct 2:  Suffering, Avoidance, & Secularism
Oct 9:  Forgiveness and Suffering (Knight)
Oct 16:  The Practice of Lament
Oct 23:  Theology of Retribution & the Cross
Oct 30:  Suffering & God’s Will
Tentative Schedule

Nov 13: Suffering & Other World Religions
Nov 20: Suffering & Dementia
Nov 27: Suffering & Evolution (Cahill)
Dec 4: The Christian Art of Dying
Dec 11: Becoming Worthy Counselors
Class Facilitators & Supporters

Rev. Michael Balboni, PhD
mtbalboni@mac.com

John Knight, MD
Ben Warf, MD
Jon Cahill, MTS, PhD cand.
Class Aims

• To search Scripture for its teaching on the subject of suffering
• To assess non-Christian views on suffering such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Secularism
• To facilitate healing and growth as we deal with our own pain and suffering, and walk with others
Some Qualifications

• An empty cross is the only symbol in Park St.
• Setting: class setting not actual sufferer
• We stand in a mystery that can only be partly grasped; Much must be held in silence
• Avoid simplistic answers – generalities vs. particular cases
• Each sufferer must come to discern before God the purpose of their suffering
• A group of seekers and learners
Class 1:

Suffering, Avoidance, & Secularism

Topics to Cover:

A. Definitions
B. The Camouflaging of Death
C. Tensions within Secularism
D. The View from Ecclesiastes
1: Definitions

Definitions

- Evil$_1$ = moral deprivation & rebellion from God
- Evil$_2$ = evil’s impact creates suffering
- Suffering = affliction / the cry of the soul
1: Definitions

“Evil₁” =

• Image of God & common grace but…
• Relational **State**: Rejection of God
• Activity: Moral agents rejecting God’s word
• Brokenness of human nature (Rom 3)
• Role of super-human or demonic agency
No One Is Righteous

9 What then? Are we Jews \(^1\) any better off? \(^2\) No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both \(^k\) Jews and \(^l\) Greeks, are \(^m\) under sin, \(^10\) as it is written:

\( ^n \) “None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God.

12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.”

13 \( ^o \) “Their throat is \(^p\) an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive.”

\( ^q \) “The venom of asps is under their lips.”

14 \( ^r \) “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”

15 \( ^s \) “Their feet are swift to shed blood;
in their paths are ruin and misery,
and \(^t\) the way of peace they have not known.”

18 \( ^u \) “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

19 Now we know that whatever \(^v\) the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, \(^w\) so that every mouth may be stopped, and \(^x\) the whole world may be held accountable to God. \(^20\) For \(^y\) by works of the law no human being \(^z\) will be justified in his sight, since \(^z\) through the law comes knowledge of sin.
1: Definitions

“Evil$_2$” = impact of moral evil
- Environmental: destruction of surroundings
- Illness: pain + illness experience
- Relationships: fragmented relationships
- Loss: loved one, ‘things,’ & personal identity
- Natural evil: earthquakes, etc.
1: Definitions

Natural evil: earthquakes, etc.

Romans 8  English Standard Version (ESV)

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. 23 And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.
1: Definitions

“Affliction”

“an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death… a kind of horror submerges the whole soul” (S. Weil)

- Isolation from self, others, & God
- Implosion: intense pain and self-absorbtion
- Sense of doom, hopelessnes, condemnation
- Anger
- Temptation: complicite with evil; succumb to it
Psalm 102  English Standard Version (ESV)

Do Not Hide Your Face from Me

A Prayer of one afflicted, when he is faint and pours out his complaint before the LORD.

102  Hear my prayer, O LORD;
    let my cry come to you!
2  Do not hide your face from me
    in the day of my distress!
    Incline your ear to me;
    answer me speedily in the day when I call!

3  For my days pass away like smoke,
    and my bones burn like a furnace.
4  My heart is struck down like grass and has withered;
    I forget to eat my bread.
5  Because of my loud groaning
    my bones cling to my flesh.
6  I am like a desert owl of the wilderness,
    like an owl[n] of the waste places;
7  I lie awake;
    I am like a lonely sparrow on the housetop.
8  All the day my enemies taunt me;
    those who deride me use my name for a curse.
9  For I eat ashes like bread
    and mingle tears with my drink,
10  because of your indignation and anger;
    for you have taken me up and thrown me down.
11  My days are like an evening shadow;
    I wither away like grass.
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2: Camouflaging Death

Camouflaging Suffering and Death (Aries)

1. Taboo and forbidden topic Chronically-ill patients (Knauft, 2005)
   – 32% had EOL discussion
   – 86% ~ “I’d rather concentrate on staying alive than talk about death”

2. Location of death from home to institution
   – In-hospital deaths in the United States from 49% in 1989 to 36% in 2007
   – 2007, 75% of all deaths took place in institutional contexts outside home
2: Camouflaging Death

3. Handling the dead body
   – From home & family to funeral directors
   – Cosmetic enhancement of corpses

4. Bereavement practices
   – From public mourning rituals (wearing black)
   – To medical deviance (DSM5: bereavement diagnosed as major depressive disorder)

5. Burial practices
   – From local burial grounds
   – To distant locations
   – From burial to cremation (eliminates memory of the dead)
2: Camouflaging Death

Why these changes?
A. Epidemiological: living longer & fewer deaths

Life expectancy globally and by world regions since 1770
2: Camouflaging Death

Why these changes?

B. Trad. religious rationales removed from culture

- Universal fear of death / terror of extinction without meaning (Becker)
- Religion explains suffering & death; the “great anxiety reliever”
- A cultural strategy is necessary to deal with suffering & death
Why these changes?

C. Rise of secular rationality

• Interpreting human experience w/out transcendence
• But how can secular worldview cope with terror of death?
• Death denial coping strategies: avoidance, hiding feelings, compartmentalizing, purposeful deception, resistance (eg fighting cancer)
2: Camouflaging Death

Why these changes?

D. Existential Security Thesis

- Secularization based on World Values Survey
- Greater social levels of security (economic equality, education, literacy, healthcare, social welfare, affluence and income, human development)
- Negatively correlated with religious identity and practices
2: Camouflaging Death

Secularism Flourishing in the here & now

- Security
- Length of Life
- Mortality

Cultural Avoidance of Suffering & Death

Religion?
Class 1:

Suffering, Avoidance, & Secularism

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3: Tensions within Secularism

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secularism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
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</tbody>
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1. Accident does not bring comfort
2. Avoidance is poor coping; suffering will catch up to us ~ then what?
3. What is “better”? Relativism cannot speak to why evil is evil. Justice is relative
The Blessings of Atheism    By SUSAN JACOBY    JAN. 5, 2013

In a recent conversation with a fellow journalist, I voiced my exasperation at the endless talk about faith in God as the only consolation for those devastated by the unfathomable murders in Newtown, Conn. Some of those grieving parents surely believe, as I do, that this is our one and only life. Atheists cannot find solace in the idea that dead children are now angels in heaven. “That only shows the limits of atheism,” my colleague replied. “It’s all about nonbelief and has nothing to offer when people are suffering.” Today’s atheists would do well to emulate some of the great 19th-century American freethinkers, who insisted that reason and emotion were not opposed but complementary.

Robert Green Ingersoll, who died in 1899 and was one of the most famous orators of his generation, personified this combination of passion and rationality. Called “The Great Agnostic,” Ingersoll insisted that there was no difference between atheism and agnosticism...

He also frequently delivered secular eulogies at funerals and offered consolation that he clearly considered an important part of his mission. In 1882, at the graveside of a friend’s child, he declared: “They who stand with breaking hearts around this little grave, need have no fear. The larger and the nobler faith in all that is, and is to be, tells us that death, even at its worst, is only perfect rest ... The dead do not suffer.”
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4. The View from Ecclesiastes

• Outside relationship with God, all our human gain is hevel ~ purposeless, vanity, chasing wind

• Outside relationship with God, all suffering ends in bitterness of death

• https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeUiuSK81-0

• Assignment: Read Ecclesiastes ~ what does it teach about suffering?