

May 31, 2026

“Surviving Suffering”

Colossians 1:24–29

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Everyone is touched by suffering to some degree at some point in their lives. It is the natural result of living in a sin-filled world with pain and sorrow. Some even question the God’s existence or goodness because they wonder how a good God could allow such pain and suffering in the world. In this study, we address these questions and offer encouragement to those who are suffering.

1. **Colossians 1:24–29** – “[24] I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, [25] of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, [26] the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. [27] To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. [28] Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. [29] To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.”
2. Paul’s suffering
 - a. Paul experienced much suffering in life.
 - i. Paul wrote about two-thirds of the epistles.
 1. He wrote four epistles between 60-62 A.D. while under house arrest awaiting a trial before Nero for preaching the Gospel.
 2. These four prison epistles include his letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Philemon, and Colossians.
 - ii. But Paul rejoiced in his sufferings.
 - b. Paul spoke of filling up “*the afflictions of Christ*” (verse 24).
 - i. This does not mean that Christ’s work on the cross was not enough.
 - ii. This means that because Christ was afflicted, Paul was also willing to be afflicted for the sake of the church.
 1. **DISCUSS:** How does Christ’s sacrifice inspire you? How can you love others sacrificially this week?
 - c. Paul was not the only one who suffered in the Bible.
 - i. We will all be touched by suffering to some degree at some time in our lifetime.
3. The problem of evil
 - a. The Barna study

- i. Barna conducted a national survey on a cross-section of adults, asking them, “If you could ask God one question and knew He would give you an answer, what would you ask?”
 - ii. The number one response was, “Why is there pain and suffering in the world?”
- b. Answering the question
- i. The world sometimes rejects God’s existence or goodness, thinking that the suffering plaguing our world is inconsistent with a good God.
 - 1. In *The Case for Faith*, Lee Strobel described this struggle when he said, “We read stories about the horrible evils like the holocaust, and the killing fields of Cambodia, and the genocide of Rwanda, and we can’t help but wonder, ‘Where is God?’ We watch television coverage of earthquakes and hurricanes, and we wonder, ‘Why didn’t God stop it?’ We read the statistic that one billion people in the world lack the basic necessities of life, and we wonder, ‘Why doesn’t God care?’ We may suffer ourselves with persistent pain or aching loss or seemingly hopeless circumstances and wonder, ‘Why doesn’t God help?’ If He is loving, and if He is good, and if He is all-powerful, then surely all of this suffering should not exist. And yet it does.”
 - ii. As Christians, we should not be surprised by pain and suffering.
 - 1. Evil exists apart from God.
 - 2. Evil entered the world through Adam and Eve’s fall.
 - a. Satan led a rebellion in heaven and enticed man to fall.
 - b. Adam and Eve’s fall spoiled Paradise, and all of mankind fell with them.
 - c. With the fall of man came the fall of the world, introducing death and every other evil.
 - d. None of are innocent because we inherited and have acted on Adam’s sin nature, but we also live in a world that will expose us to various evils.
 - 3. God sent His Son to save us from this world.
 - a. Evil reflects a fallen world, not an indifferent God.
 - b. **DISCUSS**: How do you avoid letting your circumstances shape your view of God? What should shape your view of God instead?
 - iii. We cannot fully grasp the infinite God with our finite minds.
 - 1. Surgeons, therapists, trainers, dentists, and parents understand that pain is part of the healing and growing process.

2. In Dr. Peter Kreeft's *Making Sense out of Suffering*, he compared the difference between God and man to that between a man and a bear.
 3. He argued that if a bear were caught in a trap, and a man came to free the bear out of compassion, the man must inflict additional pain by shooting the bear full of tranquilizers to immobilize the bear to come help it. Then, when the bear became semi-conscious, the man must press the paw further into the trap to dislodge the spring to free the bear. If the bear had any understanding in this semi-conscious state, he would think the man was trying to harm him rather than free him.
 4. In an interview, Kreeft said, "I believe God does the same to us sometimes, and we can't comprehend why he does it any more than the bear can understand the motivations of the man."
 5. Our inability to understand God's ways is not proof of a bad God.
4. Five Biblical truths that teach us how to survive suffering
 - a. Suffering might be relative to us, but it is not trivial to God.
 - b. Suffering teaches us what only suffering can.
 - c. Suffering produces character.
 - d. Suffering is a normal part of life.
 - e. Suffering on earth does not compare to the glory of heaven.
 5. Suffering might be relative to us, but it is not trivial to God.
 - a. Considering others' suffering is a healthy way to put your troubles into perspective, but dismissing your suffering is not healthy.
 - b. God does not rank or compare His children's suffering.
 - i. **2 Corinthians 1:3b** – God is "*the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.*" (NIV)
 1. Do not deny yourself the consolation of God by dismissing your sufferings as inconsequential.
 2. **DISCUSS:** How do we bring our sufferings to God? How has the Father consoled you?
 6. Suffering teaches us what only suffering can.
 - a. C.S. Lewis
 - i. C.S. Lewis said, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

- ii. **DISCUSS:** How has God used suffering to get your attention when you were spiritually deaf? What are some worldly distractions you can get rid of to be better attuned to the voice of God?
 - b. Joni Eareckson Tada
 - i. Joni Eareckson Tada has been wheelchair-bound for 50-plus years since her diving accident at Chesapeake Bay when she was 17.
 - ii. In her book, *The God I Love*, she said, "Sometimes God allows what he hates to accomplish what he loves."
 - iii. She called suffering a gift because of how it has drawn her closer to God.
 - iv. **DISCUSS:** How has God transformed your suffering into a gift?
7. Suffering produces character.
- a. Suffering can expose our darkness.
 - i. **DISCUSS:** How has God revealed your heart to you during times of suffering?
 - b. We can either resist and be embittered or submit to God shaping us closer to the image of His Son.
 - i. **Romans 5:3-5** – "[3] Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; [4] perseverance, character; and character, hope. [5] And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." (1984 NIV)
 - ii. **DISCUSS:** How has God used suffering to accomplish His will in you and for you?
8. Suffering is a normal part of life.
- a. We cannot escape the suffering that results from living in a sin-filled world until we go to be with the Lord.
 - b. There will be heaven on earth one day, but not yet.
 - i. **John 16:33** – Jesus said, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (NIV)
 - ii. **1 Peter 4:12-13** – "[12] Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. [13] But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed." (1984 NIV)
 - iii. **DISCUSS:** Are you able to rest in the Lord amid suffering? How has it helped to know that trials are part of God's plan and that God's coming in glory one day?

9. Suffering on earth does not compare to the glory of heaven.
 - a. We can take comfort in holding an eternal perspective.
 - i. **Romans 8:18** – *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”* (NIV)
 - ii. Paul had an eternal perspective, for he knew that heaven’s glory was greater than earth’s sorrows.
 - b. This fallen world is passing away, and its sorrows with it.
 - i. **1 John 2:17** – *“And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.”*
 - c. When we are with the Lord, there will be no more tears
 - i. **Revelation 21:4** – When we are with the Lord, “[4] *‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’* [5] *He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’*” (NIV)
 - ii. **DISCUSS:** Are you fixing your eyes on Jesus, or this world? How does this affect how you deal with suffering?
 - d. In Civilla D. Martin’s 1904 hymn “God Will Take Care of You,” she said, “Be not dismayed whate’er betide; God will take care of you. Beneath His wings of love abide; God will take care of you. . . . No matter what may be the test, God will take care of you. Lean, weary one, upon His breast; God will take care of you. God will take care of you, through ev’ry day, o’er all the way. . . . God will take care of you.”

* Unless noted, all Scriptures quoted are from the New King James (NKJV)