

Expectations

1. Warm-up Question: Jesus suffered greatly on the cross. The English word “excruciating” comes from the same Latin root word as “crucifixion.” In your own life, what’s the most excruciating pain you’ve ever experienced?
2. Life is a curious mixture of good and bad. Naturally, we all want more good and less bad. So on Sunday we wrestled with a common theological question: As a child of God, do I have the right to expect that bad things won’t happen to me – or at least that I’ll experience less bad and more good? For guidance, we looked to Jesus’ experience on the cross. One of the most famous descriptions of Jesus’ suffering was written with amazing prophetic precision hundreds of years before the fact. Read Psalm 22, Version 1, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. Look back through this passage and see how many parallels you find to what Jesus experienced on the cross.
 - b. Why do you think God gave us this precise prophecy of Jesus’ death hundreds of years in advance?
 - c. Do you think Jesus truly felt forsaken by God?
 - d. Has anyone ever had a dislocated joint? Describe the pain.
3. Dr. Truman Davis describes crucifixion as “the most painful death ever invented by humanity.” To breathe in, the victim had to push up with his legs, putting pressure on the spike driven through his feet, then quickly release due to the pain and exhaustion in his ankles and legs, which reignited all the stress and pain on his shoulder and arm joints. It was an agonizing process of constant writhing movement, likely ending with Jesus’ heart bursting due to the pressure of fluids gathered around the heart.
 - a. As the Son of God, you’d think Jesus would have been entitled to at least some special privileges or at least be exempted from life’s most degrading suffering. But he wasn’t. Why? Why did Jesus have to suffer?
 - b. We might think that, since Jesus was on a special mission, his suffering was unique to him and, therefore, not normative for the rest of us as children of God. But Jesus specifically rebuts that way of thinking by saying, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” Luke 19:23. What do you think it means to “take up our cross?”
4. Jesus’ warning that we will each have our own cross to bear seems, at first blush, to contradict biblical promises of special blessing for God’s children. For example, Psalm 1:3 says, “[Believers] are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.” One prominent prosperity preacher takes this to mean that “God wants you to prosper in your heath, in your family, in your relationships, in your business, and in

- your career.” Do you think God wants each of us to prosper in all these ways? Do you think believers get extra blessings not available to other people?
5. One of life’s great theological questions is how to reconcile biblical promises of special blessings with Jesus’ warning that we each must take up our cross and suffer. Jeff suggested that Psalm 22 (taken as a whole) offers a way to reconcile these competing principles. So now let’s read Version 2 of Psalm 22, as printed on p. 3-4.
 - a. When we read Psalm 22 in full, we see how it zigzags between suffering and triumph, between distress and hope. The psalmist experienced great suffering, but also the blessing of being delivered through his suffering and out the other side to a better place. That’s precisely the pattern of Jesus on the cross. Read Philippians 2:5-11. What insight does this passage offer about suffering?
 - b. Read Jesus’ Beatitudes, Matthew 5:3-12. Based on what Jesus says here, what kind of mixture of blessing and suffering should believers anticipate?
 - c. Isaiah 43:2 says, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” What do you think that means?
 6. Jonathon Haidt offers a thought experiment that helps us grapple with the role suffering plays in life. He asks each of us to imagine that you have a newborn daughter. Shortly after she’s born, God gives you a script for her life. The script includes several great tragedies. She will have a learning disability, she will lose a dear friend in high school to cancer, and in college she will be in a car accident and lose a leg. Through each of these moments of great suffering, she will learn incredible life lessons about compassion for those who are different, the unpredictability of life, the importance of savoring each moment, and the power of spirit to triumph over disabilities. Your daughter then goes on to become a great school teacher whose wisdom and influence shapes hundreds of students’ lives. Once you’ve read the script, God offers you the option of removing some or all of the hardships from your daughter’s life.
 - a. What do you do – and why? What insights does this exercise give you about how God interacts with us? Should God eliminate suffering from our life?
 - b. Jeff said, “God’s greatest aspiration for us is not that we avoid danger or suffering, but that we live deeply meaningful lives. More often than to, we find our deepest meaning in and through our suffering.” Do you agree or disagree? Why?
 - c. Not all suffering makes life more meaningful and beautiful. It depends whether we “take up our cross,” i.e., embrace our suffering, rather than resenting it. Tell us about a time of great suffering in your life? Did it eventually add meaning, depth, or beauty to your life? If given the option, would you remove that suffering from your life? Why or why not?

Psalm 22 (Version 1 – A Partial Version)

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? ² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

⁶ I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. ⁷ All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads; ⁸ "Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—let him rescue the one in whom he delights!"

¹² Many bulls encircle me, strong bulls of Bashan surround me; ¹³ they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion.

¹⁴ I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; ¹⁵ my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.

¹⁶ For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me. My hands and feet have shriveled; ¹⁷ I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me; ¹⁸ they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.

Psalm 22 (Version 2 – Fuller Version)

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? ² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

³ Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. ⁴ In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. ⁵ To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

⁶ I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. ⁷ All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads; ⁸ "Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—let him rescue the one in whom he delights!"

⁹ Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast. ¹⁰ On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God. ¹¹ Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

¹² Many bulls encircle me, strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
¹³ they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion.

¹⁴ I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; ¹⁵ my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.

¹⁶ For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me. My hands and feet have shriveled; ¹⁷ I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me; ¹⁸ they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.

¹⁹ But you, O LORD, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid! ²⁰ Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog! ²¹ Save me from the mouth of the lion! From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me. . . .