

## Engage360, Ep 27 | Part 2: Theological Approaches to Suffering and Happiness

**Introduction:** Welcome to Engage360 Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.

**Dr. Don Payne:** Welcome back to Engage360. I'm Don Payne, your host. We are genuinely grateful that you would take time to connect with us in this way and whatever your other connections or prior connections are to Denver Seminary. We want to serve you through these podcasts. So if you find any of this valuable in any way, you can really help us extend the reach of it by telling others about the podcast. Do that through your Facebook page or your Twitter account or whatever medium you choose. And for those you might tell about the podcast, whether or not they have any direct connections to Denver Seminary, we hope that we can be of some benefit to them as well. Now, even if you're not in the Denver area, we hope you'll stay in touch with our website. There's a lot going on around here in addition to the classes we offer on campus. For example, we will very soon have available from this week's guest, Dr. Doug Groothuis, a free five hour course on Apologetics. There have to be people in your church or your other circles who would benefit from this and from, many of the other resources on our website. So stay in touch with that. You know, it may be that among the least popular passages in the Bible is Philippians 3.10, at least the last part of that verse where Paul says, "I want to know Christ yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death." It is that last part, participation in his sufferings that has to be about the least popular statement in the Bible because nobody in their right mind wants to suffer. But few, if any, get an exemption from it in at least in some form. Those of us who enjoy the benefits of a well-resourced, technologically advanced society can sometimes fool ourselves into thinking that we ought not ever have to suffer, or that there ought to be some preemptive answer for suffering, or at least a quick remedy for it when it does come. But if I'm reading the scriptures properly, how we understand and internalize the gospel is in some ways connected to how we think about suffering. The gospel simply doesn't have much nuance or texture to it apart from the realities of life in a world where human fallenness has led to incalculable brokenness. So any genuinely Christian conversation about suffering can and should be capable of the most brutal honesty about suffering. With that honesty, positioning us to receive a type of joy, a type of redemption that's impossible, apart from the foil of suffering. Now, this week's episode marks the second of a three part series we're doing on suffering and happiness. And I hope you were able to take in the first installment of that conversation last week with our graduate K.J. Ramsey. If not, I hope you'll take a listen to that and plan to get a copy of her forthcoming book, *This Too Shall Last*. This week. We are honored to continue that exploration with our colleague Dr. Doug Groothuis, who serves here as Professor of Philosophy and as Director of the Apologetics and Ethics program. Want to put in a plug for that along the way. Doug, welcome to the podcast.

Dr. Doug Groothuis: Thank you. Happy to be here.

Dr. Don Payne: Dr. Groothuis completed his PhD in philosophy at the University of Oregon and has been on the faculty here at Denver Seminary since 1993. Many of you will know him or know of him, not only from his teaching here, but from his many speaking engagements in the public sector as he seeks to present a compelling case for the truthfulness of the Christian faith. And Doug is also widely known for his numerous publications, among them are *Unmasking the New Age*, *The Soul and Cyberspace*, *Truth Decay*, and his Magnum Opus, I think you'd consider this your Magnum Opus, *Christian Apologetics*. Which I believe is fairly widely used as a textbook for apologetics courses in a number of schools. However, Doug's most recent full length book is the platform for our conversation today and it is called *Walking Through Twilight: A Wife's Illness, A Philosopher's Lament*, from InterVarsity 2017. I have to tell you that the book is gripping as is the story that gave birth to it. So as we launch into this conversation first, Doug, why don't you give us a brief fly over of what the book's about and why you wrote it?

Dr. Doug Groothuis: Well, the book is a lament, a lament is basically an unburdening of the soul about deep suffering. And I wanted to do that in a biblical way. I wanted to take my struggles and the pain to the Lord and to write a book that would help people do the same thing in their own particular crush of circumstance. So it's a story of my wife and I as we walked through her dementia, and she passed away last July, but I wrote the book while she was still alive, but she was declining really every day. So my wife Rebecca Mural Groothuis was a very brilliant writer and editor, and we eventually found out she had a very rare form of dementia. And this form of dementia would take away her speaking ability and eventually her ability to just do anything. So I was asked by an editor of *Christianity Today* to write an article about this in 2015 and I wrote the article and it was really well received. I got more responses to this than anything I'd ever written really. So several publishers contacted me about writing a book and I ended up writing this for InterVarsity. So it's a reflection on suffering, my own suffering, Rebecca's' suffering, I hope through the lens of scripture. And I am a philosopher, so I deal with some of the philosophical issues that come with that.

Dr. Don Payne: With that said though, you do say early in the book, you sort of admit that this is less, excuse me, less of a maybe a linear argument than it is a series of personal evocations, personal reflections, musings.

Dr. Doug Groothuis: True. Right. I'm a philosopher. So we are all about arguments and going from A to B to C and how that leads to D, but this is more of a reflection on themes in life and on episodes in life. I have a number of episodes that I include which are shorter than the chapters, particularly salient things that happened to Rebecca and to me, sometimes reprieves from the suffering, sometimes records of very intense suffering. So I think that the book makes sense. It's thematically organized, but it is not a one long argument for Christianity the way I did in *Christian Apologetics*, certainly.

- Dr. Don Payne: Right, right. I did appreciate some of those little anecdotes along the way, like the red book. The couple on the Red Book.
- Dr. Doug Groothuis: Yeah, that was, that was a case where Rebecca was losing her ability to speak, but she wanted me to give someone the red book and she couldn't say what it was, ended up being a book that she co-edited, called *Discovering Biblical Equality*. She wanted to give it to one of her helpers who came into assist with her. And I recount the process of determining what the red book was. And so that's an insight into just the real struggle of Becky to communicate clearly when she was a wordsmith and just an utterly brilliant person. So we had to walk through that. Losing those really stellar abilities that she had is a very, arduous, excruciating journey. But the Lord was with us through it all. And it's kind of odd because people might think this must have been a very difficult book to write. It actually was not that hard to write. It was hard to live. Because as I wrote it, I realized that it needed to be written for other people who were suffering in ways that I might've been suffering. So in some ways I, I kind of marvel at the book, I pick it up once in a while and say, gosh, did I write that? I did and I lived that. But it certainly, I hope I don't have to write another one. I think one lament in a lifetime is enough.
- Dr. Don Payne: Does it become kind of surreal for you when you look back on it and read it?
- Dr. Doug Groothuis: I guess it does in some ways because I'm in a season of life now that's really quite happy. I'm newly remarried and a lot of the stress and difficulty of my life has abated for now. So I think now it's a matter of putting things in perspective as time goes on after Becky's death. But I still very viscerally remember the events in the book.
- Dr. Don Payne: I appreciate your ability now to reflect on suffering in a sense, after the fact, with a different perspective on it. But, but doing that, let's start kind of at the broad level. What are we talking about when we talk about suffering? Breakdown that concept for us in ways that, and the different ways in a lot of the different ways people use the word.
- Dr. Doug Groothuis: Right. Well biblically we can talk about suffering that comes because we obey Christ like persecution or we can talk about the suffering that doesn't seem to be explicable, the hardships, the difficulties that come in life, the things that we find many times in the book of Ecclesiastes for example. So, my response to suffering existentially as a Christian, is to use this category of lament, which is the idea of making known to God your distress and your trouble. Maybe 60 of the Psalms are Psalms of lament. Of course, Jesus lamented over the unbelief of his own people. There are many examples of lament in scripture, so I try to explain what lament is in my book and then the book is a lament. And I appeal to a lot of biblical literature, especially the wisdom literature to try to help people get a way of suffering well. Because we don't like to think of it this way, but suffering is a skill that we all need to learn. It's not something we directly pursue, but we are going to suffer. So the question is will we suffer well or not?

And I've done both and I tell you, suffering well is a lot better than suffering poorly.

Dr. Don Payne: I pulled out of your book three excerpts and this was not planned, but I think, providential. Three statements you made about Lament, you say we have little instruction on the wise use of lament. I take it that hope grounded in truth needs lament as it's tonic. And then you say a couple of pages later, sentimentality may be defined as caring for something more than God does and that, or this is the open secret of idolatry. And a few pages later you say, biblical lament is not grumbling, which is selfish, impatient, and pointless. I found I highlighted those passages in your book and I would love to have you comment more on those. You've kind of started that on a trail of it already.

Dr. Doug Groothuis: I don't know if I can say it better than I've said, I forgot I said one of those. But I think we have to navigate between self-pity and stoicism because biblical life, biblical ethics is not stoic. It's we feel the difficulties and the struggles of life profoundly. Jesus did, Paul did, Jeremiah did, John the Baptist did. So the issue is putting our lived experience into the context and story of scripture. So we know there is real tragedy in the world, but tragedy doesn't have the last say. So we have hope for restoration and I would often comfort Becky with the hope of a new body of the new heavens and the new earth. But that doesn't take away the suffering. So it's appropriate to voice our complaint, to voice our pain, even agony to the Lord. But we're praying, we're interacting with the Lord. And the greatest of all immense was Jesus on the cross quoting Psalm 22, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? So in the work of the cross and in that lament was actually the redemption of the universe and the redemption of all those who come to Christ. So suffering for the Christian is not meaningless. And one of the great benefits of being a Christian, and this also has apologetic force, is suffering with hope but suffering in an honest way because you can't put a smiley face on everything, scripture says in Ecclesiastes three. There's a time to mourn and there's a time to dance. And we're called to weep with those who weep, and laugh with those who laugh. So the full gamut of our emotional life should be offered to the Lord to be pruned and to be sanctified. And lament is one of those categories.

Dr. Don Payne: When you talk about the wise use of lament, that that almost sounds to me like lament is both reflective and perhaps instructional, teaching us how to take our sufferings to the Lord. And I would love to have you push that even a little bit further. What does lament have to teach us about, or let me put it differently. How does lament expose some of the false assumptions or other misconceptions that are floating around about suffering?

Dr. Doug Groothuis: Right. Well, lament recognizes the loss of a true good. So if you tell someone, I think you should just get over the loss of your husband. It's been a year or two, just move on. I think that's unwise and actually an ungodly thing to say. We need to recognize the severity of loss. And lament teaches us to do that. And I think in American culture, especially where we want to move on and leave things behind, we may not adequately reflect and ruminate on what the loss is.

So when you have a tremendous loss, you don't get over it. It, you absorb it into your being, and then it changes you. You become a different kind of person. Now for Christians, we have hope and we have encouragement, and we believe that God ultimately restores the years the locusts have eaten. But that doesn't mean that we can somehow take a helicopter trip over the sorrow into the happiness. You have to go through the sorrow with Jesus, just the way he went through the sorrow of the cross unto the resurrection. So I think lament helps us to deeply engage the brokenness, the fallenness of the world, but with hope. And I'd never want to say to someone who's suffering. Well, it really wasn't so bad. In fact, we can't even know what the suffering is of some people. Proverbs 14.10 says that each heart knows its own bitterness and no one shares its joy. So I know what it's like to lose a wife through dementia. I don't know what it's like to lose a child. I don't have any children. So we have to be patient to listen to others, to let them lament in their own language and not try to hurry up the lament process, not try to minimize it. In fact, when you're trying to comfort someone, ironically, one of the worst things you can say is, I know how you feel because you really don't. Each person knows suffering in their own unique way. But we can come alongside, put a hand on the shoulder, simply say, I am so sorry. And there's a verse in Isaiah, Isaiah 50, verse 4, which is applied to the suffering servant that would be Jesus. And it says, the Lord has given me an instructed tongue to know the word that sustains the weary. So I think when we lament with others, we need that instructed tongue that sustains the weary. That doesn't make the weary feel guilty because they're still sad. That doesn't put pressure on the weary. And there may be a time when you have to challenge someone to, you know, get washed, put on a new pair of clothes and go out into the world. Don't spend all your time in the, in the bedroom sleeping. People can be chronically depressed. They need help for that. But I think in our culture, the tendency is to try to rush people along and not even allow people to lament at all. Even some funerals, I don't think, enter deeply enough into the loss of death. It's all about a celebration of life. Well, it is, but it's also lamenting the passing of someone we loved and someone we will miss.

Dr. Don Payne:

I really appreciate that, Doug, because in many of my own observations, people will want to, I know I'm speaking very generally here, people, but it's quite common for people to want to focus on the hope so much that it ends up in a binary relationship with the nature of the loss the gravity of the laws, the reality of the loss and what you've captured so eloquently is that those losses come with us into the future happiness into the hope they become part of a new fabric. We don't leave those. We don't jump over those. I think that was your image. But we bring them with us, and they're always with us. There is, and I could speak to this from some of my own experience, there is with some of those irreversible losses, those unrecoverable losses and in this life anyway, there is a sort of deep running undercurrent of loss and sadness that is always there. Even when we feel good, right? That never goes away, right? It's a whole new.

Dr. Doug Groothuis:

And it sensitizes you to sufferings that are somewhat like your own. So if I hear of someone whose wife has dementia or someone who has to take care of their

spouse who is slowly declining, then I, I feel a measure of empathy that I might not have felt 15 years ago, 10 years ago. And then I can try to be a voice of encouragement and a voice of consolation to that person. But also everybody has their limits and you can't enter into everyone's sad story. And that's something I've been learning now that my life has changed quite a bit, is I want to be a deeply empathetic person, to have a word that sustains the weary, to not rush people along through their grief. But you simply can't enter into everyone's deep lament because we're finite, we're limited, and we need times of refreshment. We need those happy times of going to jazz clubs and trying to dance with your wife. She can dance. I can't, but there is that verse. There's a time to dance. And she reminds me of that. She's a dancer.

Dr. Don Payne: Right. Assuming that writing your book did not merely express your journey, how did it also affect your journey, if at all?

Dr. Doug Groothuis: Well, I think it affected it because I've interacted with many people who have read the book and responded to me a lot of unsolicited cards and emails and people saying that it helped me in my own sorrows. It gave me some categories for suffering. So I'm very grateful for that. That's why I wrote the book. I'm really grateful for the endorsements that I got. The foreword was written by Nicholas Wolterstorff, who's a very prestigious philosopher. He wrote a book a number of years ago about the loss of his son. His son died in a mountain climbing accident. And so to have him write the foreword, knowing what he went through and knowing his status as a philosopher was very gratifying to me. And I hope that it will draw some people into the book to find some encouragement and help.

Dr. Don Payne: I'd love for you to say a little bit more about how our, how a good theology of suffering then helps form for us a theology of joy and happiness. You've touched on this already, but I want to hear you say more about that.

Dr. Doug Groothuis: That's a profound issue. I've been wrestling that with that for many years, but often I go to Romans 8 where Paul says that the whole creation is groaning in travail awaiting its final redemption. That's my paraphrase. But you can't divorce the groaning from the redemption or the redemption from the groaning because the greatness of redemption is based on the restoration of an original goodness, but then having gone through the fall to the eventual new heavens and the new earth, and nothing is ultimately wasted, and Paul tells us that God is working through our suffering to achieve a great glory. It's not merely a compensation, that will have endless bliss and that will more than compensate for a finite time of suffering. That's true. And scripture does use that kind of language. But it's also that there's an organic connection somehow in the mysterious Providence of God that it is through this suffering that somehow our glory is being constructed, but there will be a decisive point in the future where we enter the new heavens and the new earth and then there will be no curse, and no sin, no tears. God saves our tears. But we know there'll be a time when there will be no more new tears to be added to that. Yeah.

Dr. Don Payne: Here, here. One thing I really appreciate that about that Doug, and we touched on this just a few moments ago, is this notion that we cannot in this life anyway sort of compensate for it by looking at, by either saying to ourselves or others, Oh, it's not really that bad, when in fact it is every bit that bad. Whatever the loss or the cause of the suffering may be. And then, and there's a more subtle form of that I think that is that many Christians are prone to, which is to say, well, look at what the Lord brought out of that. Look at all the good the Lord did through that. Right? And I can remember from, you know, some parts of my own journey, how in the most intense parts of that crucible, to be brutally honest, you're really not concerned what good the Lord's going to bring out of it. You just want that person back or you want that, what was lost back. Though it is a good thing. Praise God for what God does bring out of it. But sometimes that is as given as sort of a cheap way of trying to make somebody feel better or to trivialize a loss. Look what the Lord is going to bring out of it, which is really, it sounds awfully pious, but it's quite beside the point, wouldn't you say?

Dr. Doug Groothuis: Well, it is, and there's a danger of people trying to read the mind of God where we can't. So I see good things that God brought out of Rebecca getting dementia, in ways I became more patient. I can see some good things, but I can't say there were enough things to compensate for the pain that she went through and that I went through. So I don't try to read the mind of God. There are a lot of passages in scripture that say that we can't know a lot of what God is up to my paraphrase, but you see that in Romans 11. I think it's a 33 through 36. That his ways are beyond us, but he has revealed enough of himself and enough of his ways that we can put those pockets of mystery into a framework of meaning and knowledge. So I've spent so much of my adult life defending and explaining the Christian faith. I wrote a big book about it Christian Apologetics. I teach on it all the time. So I'm convinced that Christianity is true and rational, but I don't know why a brilliant woman in her late fifties would get a terminal form of dementia and that we would see her mind decay over years and years. I won't even try to explain that. I think it's actually pointless to try to explain it. However you can try to find the meaning in it and you can look beyond it to the time of restoration. But a better part of Christian wisdom is knowing what you can't know and living within that. And I'm not advocating fideism, faith has no relationship to reason or we just believe without any evidence or argument, by no means. But sometimes people can do more harm than good if they try to tell you what good is coming out of the suffering or if they tell you, well, you know, in the end it will all just be wonderful. True, but that's not the kind of presence you should have. In fact, I was just talking to a young apologist on the radio or on a podcast recently, and he and his wife experienced a miscarriage and someone said to him one day, you will see just that this was the best day of your life, or this was the most wonderful thing.

Dr. Don Payne: That's probably a pretty good way to get punched, if you don't be careful.

Dr. Doug Groothuis: It is exactly right. I mean that was extremely insensitive, but you see why people want to do it, but the reason they come up with these absurd comments is I think because they haven't understood what lament is. And if they did, they

could be a more wise, caring presence for people. I think people are afraid of lament because well, we're Christians. We're supposed to be happy and joyful and hopeful. We are, but the Bible never downplays the fallenness of this world and the depth of suffering that we can experience in this world. In fact, there are two Psalms of lament. There are about 60 in the Old Testament. Two of them don't even resolve into happiness. Psalm 39 in Psalm 88. Psalm 39, David ends basically saying that he's ticked off at God. My paraphrase again, Psalm 88 is of a Heman Ezraheight and his last words of the Psalm are darkness is my closest friend or another translation is all my friends are in darkness. Neither one are very positive, upbeat, uplifting, but life often does not seem to resolve. But we know that God is in it with us. We know that because of Christ suffering for us, and we know that there is a resolution, but it's not in our timing. It's in God's time.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, this is, I think exactly what we need to hear, Doug, because this is the type of brutal honesty that the gospel of Christ allows us to have for our suffering. And yet it's a brutal honesty about suffering that it is itself, it seems part of the process of experiencing a redemption of that suffering. And so that brutal honesty that we can have because of the gospel is not of melancholy or macabre. It is sobering but sobering in a, we might say a settled in a focused way that, that postures us for receiving a more substantive hope.

Dr. Doug Groothuis: I agree. That's well put.

Dr. Don Payne: And I'm really appreciative of how you've situated lament as the linkage between suffering and a realistic joy and happiness, each part of which is on a consistent continuum. Not played off against each other.

Dr. Doug Groothuis: Right. And another aspect that is so crucial as a Christian is that there's forgiveness when we don't suffer well. And I start out the book actually by talking about a very terrible response I had when Becky was first in a psychiatric unit. I was just enraged. I didn't understand things. I was yelling at people and it took me a while to get used to the protocols of a psychiatric unit and I didn't handle it very well for some time. I did try to go back and apologize, but I saw a side of myself, a side of deep rage, that was really ugly. But I'm so grateful that we can come back to the Lord for forgiveness. And I often say to myself, Romans 8.1, there is now therefore no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. So usually suffering brings the best and the worst out of us. And when it brings out the worst, we can go to Christ and know that we are forgiven and renewed and given more opportunities to serve him and love other people.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, very well said. Doug, thanks for sharing your story with us today, as well as through the book. And I want to encourage our listeners to get a copy of this book if you have not already. It's called *Walking Through Twilight: A Wife's Illness, A Philosopher's Lament*, InterVarsity press 2017. We have been visiting with Dr. Doug Groothuis, and next week we'll wrap up this three-part conversation with our Old Testament colleague, Dr. Knut Heim using his recently published commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes, as a prompt to talk about a



theology of happiness. And I hope you'll make it a priority to connect with this again next week for that interview. Want to give another word of thanks to those who labor off mic to make this podcast possible. Dusty Di Santo, Christa Ebert, Rob Foley, Aaron Johnson, Kristy McGarvey, Maritsa Smith, and Andrea Weyand. For them, and for all of us here at Denver Seminary, thanks for listening and we're grateful you're with us. Hope to talk to you again next week. Take care.