Session 3: Theological Academy – Redemptive Suffering

How Physical Suffering Differs from Emotional Suffering

"Quick recap, because the distinction matters. Spiritual suffering touches our relationship with God. Emotional suffering touches our heart and mind — grief, fear, trauma, rejection, loneliness. Physical suffering is different again: it touches the body itself. Pain that doesn't respond to reason. A diagnosis that doesn't care how strong your faith is. A limitation that doesn't lift no matter how much you pray it away tonight. Its question isn't *Do You still love me, God?* or *Will anyone see me in this?* — it's *Are You in here too, Lord, in this actual body of mine that hurts, that's failing, that's running out of time?*

I want to bring companions along with us again this week — two more voices from the Communion of Saints who didn't just endure physical suffering, but let Christ meet them inside it.

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux died of tuberculosis at twenty-four, after a final year of suffering so severe that both her lungs were affected and she was in near-constant pain, unable to eat, coughing blood (Archives Carmel de Lisieux). She never pretended the pain wasn't real. But ten days before she died, gaunt and exhausted, she wrote what may be the most startling line in this whole series: 'I rejoice that God still lets me suffer for love of Him' (By Love Alone, Thérèse of Lisieux Quotes). That's not denial. That's a woman who had spent her whole short life learning to hand everything to God, including — especially — a body that was failing her.

And Father Damien of Molokai spent sixteen years as a missionary priest to a leprosy colony on a Hawaiian island that the government had turned into a place of exile, serving as pastor, physician, and builder to people everyone else had abandoned. In 1884, after two decades of close daily contact with his patients, he contracted leprosy himself. He refused every offer to leave for treatment and stayed with his people until it killed him five years later, at age forty-nine (Britannica, St. Damien of Molokai). His body became one more leprous body in that colony — and that is exactly why the people there trusted him completely. He wasn't just serving the suffering. By the end, he was one of them.

Physical suffering is real for many of you listening — chronic pain, a hard diagnosis, a body that doesn't do what it used to. Thérèse and Damien don't hand us an explanation for why. What they hand us is proof that Christ can be found — really found, not just believed in — inside a suffering body, not only outside of one."

The Reality of Bodily Pain, Illness, and Limitation

"Scripture doesn't soften physical suffering into a metaphor. It shows us actual bodies in actual pain. **Job** is the clearest case in the whole Bible — a man who lost his health after he'd already lost everything else:

> "So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head." — Job 2:7 (NIV)

And Job doesn't perform composure about it. He tells God exactly what the pain is doing to him, night after night:

> "Night pierces my bones; my gnawing pains never rest." — Job 30:17 (NIV)

Paul carried something similar — Scripture never tells us exactly what, only that it was physical, painful, and permanent:

> "I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" — 2 Corinthians 12:7–9 (NIV)

Notice what didn't happen: God didn't remove the thorn. He didn't even fully explain it. He met Paul inside it instead.

And for those of us watching our bodies simply wear down with age or chronic illness rather than a single dramatic affliction, Paul offers this — not denial, but a different way of counting:

> "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all." — 2 Corinthians 4:16–17 (NIV)

Whatever is happening in your body tonight — a diagnosis, a chronic pain, a slow decline — Scripture doesn't ask you to pretend it away. It asks you to bring it, honestly, to the God who let Job name every sore and let Paul name his thorn."

Ask yourself:

1. What physical pain, illness, or limitation am I carrying right now that I haven't been fully honest with God about?
2. Where have I believed that my body's weakness, illness, or limitation makes me less useful, less lovable, or less seen by God?

Christ in the Flesh: Compassion, Healing, and the Redemption of the Body

"Here's what makes Christianity different from a philosophy that simply tells you to endure pain bravely: God didn't stay outside a body. He took one on.

> "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet he did not sin." — Hebrews 4:15 (NIV)

And His own body suffered in ways that were physically, not just spiritually, agonizing:

> "During his earthly life he offered prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission." — Hebrews 5:7 (NIV)

That same Christ spent much of His ministry with His hands on sick and suffering bodies, not at a distance from them:

> "When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all who were ill. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: 'He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases.'" — Matthew 8:16–17 (NIV)

And on the cross, His own wounded body became the source of our healing, not just an image of it:

> "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." — 1 Peter 2:24 (NIV)

And finally — this isn't a series that ends with 'endure your body until you can finally leave it behind.' Scripture promises the opposite: your body itself gets redeemed.

> "We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies." — Romans 8:23 (NIV)
>
> "The Lord Jesus Christ... will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." — Philippians 3:20–21 (NIV)

Whatever your body is carrying tonight — pain, illness, disability, the weight of years — it is not the last word on that body. Christ took on flesh, suffered in flesh, healed in flesh, and rose in flesh. Yours is included in that story."

Ask yourself:

3. Where do I need to trust that Christ, who suffered in a real body, understands exactly what I'm carrying physically right now?
4. What would it look like this week to ask God for healing, or for the grace to endure, without shame — and to trust Him with the answer either way?

Final pondering to journal:

What questions, pushback, or 'me too' moments came up for you tonight as we talked about pain, illness, limitation, and the body Christ took on for our sake?

Closing Thoughts

"Tonight we sat with something that's hard to argue our way out of — the suffering that happens in the body itself. We heard Job name his pain, Paul name his thorn, and we heard that Christ didn't stay

outside any of it. He took on a body, suffered in it, healed with it, and rose in it — and He's promised to do the same for ours.
Whatever your body is carrying tonight, hold onto this: 'The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit' (Psalm 34:18 (NIV)). Let's close in prayer."

Closing Prayer
"Lord Jesus, You took on a real body, and in it You wept, bled, and died — so You know exactly what it is to hurt in flesh and bone. Tonight we bring You our pain, our diagnoses, our limitations, and the slow wearing-down of age. Where You choose to heal, we thank You. Where You ask us to carry something a while longer, give us the grace Paul was given — Your strength made perfect in our weakness. And remind us that these bodies are not the end of the story; You have promised to redeem them too. In Your holy name we pray, Amen."