Session 4: Theological Academy – Redemptive Suffering

Relational and Social Suffering

Betrayal, conflict, injustice, persecution — and the reconciling mercy of Christ

Lord, we come to You tonight carrying the wounds other people have left in us — the betrayals, the conflicts, the injustices, the times we were pushed to the margins and no one seemed to notice. You know this kind of suffering intimately, because You lived it Yourself. Meet us here tonight. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Let's return one more time to our anchor verse for this series."

> *"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."* — Psalm 34:18 (NIV)

"Before we turn to tonight, let's take a moment to remember the whole road we've walked together these past four weeks.

In **Night One**, we sat with spiritual suffering — the ache of feeling distant from God, doubting His love, wrestling with silence, and asking, 'Are You still there?' in the middle of unanswered prayer.

In **Night Two**, we turned to emotional suffering — grief, fear, trauma, rejection, and loneliness, the pain that lives in the heart and mind even when nothing is visibly wrong.

In **Night Three**, just last week, we named physical suffering — illness, chronic pain, physical limitation, and the slow wearing-down of age, suffering that shows up in the body itself and doesn't respond to reasoning it away.

And tonight, **Night Four**, we close this series with relational and social suffering — betrayal, conflict, injustice, and persecution, the wounds other people and the communities we belong to leave in us. And we'll end with what Christ does with exactly this kind of pain, because He didn't just teach about it — He lived through all of it Himself, at the hands of people He loved.

Before we dive in — in one word, what comes to mind when you think of a relationship or a community that has caused you pain?

"Quick recap, because the distinction matters one more time. Spiritual suffering touches our relationship with God. Emotional suffering touches our own heart and mind. Physical suffering touches the body. Tonight's suffering is different again: it comes from outside us, from other people and the systems they build — a friend who betrays us, a conflict that won't resolve, an injustice we

can't fix, a community that decides we don't belong. Its question isn't *Are You still with me, God?* — it's *Lord, where were You when they did that to me? And how do I not become bitter?*

I want to bring two companions along with us tonight — one a memory from my own life, and one a voice from the Communion of Saints — who both suffered profoundly at the hands of other people, and who show us what it looks like to let Christ, not bitterness, have the last word.

The first is my own family's story. When I was a boy, we walked the two blocks to St. Chlotilde Catholic Church for our first Mass in a new community. The moment we walked in, we felt it before we saw it — rows of white faces turning to stare. We slipped into a pew and tried to disappear. When Mass ended, we walked out through a silent crowd that parted around us; no one said a word, but the message was clear: we were an intrusion, not an addition.

My mother, always soft-spoken, gripped my hand tighter with every step, and began to whisper, then repeat, words I have never forgotten: 'That man is not going to put me out of my church.' We learned later that the priest simply did not want Black parishioners there. He did not know my mother. From that day forward, she went to daily Mass and sat in the front pew, directly under his nose — hatred had tried to push her out, and she answered by planting herself deeper.

I am my mother's son, and that morning taught me that the priest's problem was never the shade of my mother's skin. It was the hardness of his heart. Racism is not a misunderstanding — it is a sin, a refusal to see the image of God in another human face.

My mother refused to be moved by one man's hatred inside her own parish. Half a world away, and inside a far larger machine of hatred, another believer refused to be moved too — not by staying, but by stepping forward and giving up his life for a stranger.

Father Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish priest imprisoned at Auschwitz for hiding Jewish refugees from the Nazis, watched guards select ten prisoners to be starved to death after an escape. When one of the chosen men cried out for his wife and children, Kolbe stepped forward and asked to take his place. He spent his final two weeks leading the other condemned men in prayer inside a starvation cell, calming the dying, until he was killed by lethal injection (Britannica). He was persecuted by an entire system built on hatred and injustice — and he answered it with the one thing that system couldn't touch: laying down his own life for someone he'd never met.

Whatever betrayal, conflict, injustice, or exclusion you're carrying tonight, these two witnesses don't tell you it didn't hurt, or that it wasn't wrong. What they show us is that Christ can meet us in the

wound another person caused — and that His mercy is somehow bigger than the worst thing anyone has done to us."

Scripture is remarkably honest about how much people hurt each other — including the people closest to us.

Joseph was betrayed and sold into slavery by his own brothers. Decades later, when he finally had the power to destroy them, he said this instead:

> *"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."* — Genesis 50:20 (NIV)

David, writing centuries before Christ, names the particular sting of betrayal by someone close — a verse Jesus Himself would later apply to His own betrayal by Judas:

> *"Even my close friend, someone I trusted, who shared my bread, has turned against me."* — Psalm 41:9 (NIV)

And Scripture doesn't stop at personal betrayal — it names systemic and social injustice just as directly:

> *"Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun. I saw the tears of the oppressed — and they have no comforter."* — Ecclesiastes 4:1 (NIV)

> *"Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked."* — Psalm 82:3–4 (NIV)

Whatever betrayal, conflict, or injustice you're carrying tonight — whether it happened once or has become a pattern in your life — Scripture doesn't minimize it. Joseph's brothers really did wrong him. David's friend really did turn on him. The oppressed really do weep, and God sees every tear."

Let's pause. I'll read two questions. You can journal, or simply sit with them in silence — whatever helps you be honest.

Ask yourself:

1. Who has betrayed, wronged, or treated me unjustly, and have I actually let myself name what that cost me — rather than minimizing it or explaining it away?
2. Where has an unresolved conflict or injustice quietly turned into bitterness or distance from God, from others, or from myself?

"Here is what makes tonight's theme different from the world's usual advice about betrayal and injustice: Christ doesn't just sympathize with this kind of suffering from a safe distance. He lived through every form of it Himself — betrayed by a friend, falsely accused, unjustly convicted, and pushed to the very margins of His own society.

> *"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me."* — Matthew 5:10–11 (NIV)

> *"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first."* — John 15:18 (NIV)

And Peter, writing to a persecuted, marginalized church, points them straight to Christ's own example of unjust suffering:

> *"For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God... 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate."* — 1 Peter 2:19,22–23 (NIV)

And then, at the moment His own betrayal, injustice, and persecution reached their absolute worst — nailed to a cross by the very people He came to save — Christ said the words that reframe everything we've talked about tonight:

> *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."* — Luke 23:34 (NIV)

That forgiveness wasn't just personal. Paul tells us it tore down the walls that divide entire groups of people from each other:

> *"For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility."* — Ephesians 2:14 (NIV)

Which is why Paul can say to us what would otherwise sound impossible:

> *"Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."* — Romans 12:17,19,21 (NIV)

> *"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."* — Colossians 3:13 (NIV)

Christ doesn't ask us to pretend betrayal, injustice, and persecution don't hurt. He asks us to bring them to a cross where He already absorbed the very worst version of every one of them — and to

trust that His mercy can do in us what we cannot do on our own: forgive, reconcile, and not be overcome."

"Let's pause once more. Same as before — journal, or sit quietly."

Ask yourself:

3. Is there someone I need to begin forgiving — not because what they did was acceptable, but because I want to stop letting it own me?
4. Where might God be asking me to be a source of reconciliation rather than division in a relationship, family, or community that's been fractured by conflict or exclusion?

Closing Thoughts and Series Wrap-Up

"Tonight we named the suffering that comes from other people and from the communities we belong to — betrayal, conflict, injustice, persecution, exclusion. We heard Joseph forgive the brothers who sold him, David name the sting of a trusted friend's betrayal, and Christ Himself endure every one of these at the hands of the people He came to save — and answer all of it with 'Father, forgive them.'

That brings us to the end of this four-week series. We started with spiritual suffering — the ache of feeling far from God. We moved to emotional suffering — grief, fear, trauma, rejection, loneliness. We sat with physical suffering — the pain and limitation that live in our very bodies. And tonight we closed with relational and social suffering — the wounds other people and our communities leave in us. Four very different kinds of pain, and one constant answer running underneath every single night: *'The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit'* (Psalm 34:18 (NIV)).

Whatever brought you to this series — whichever night hit closest to home — I hope you leave tonight not with suffering explained away, but with a God who has been close to you in every form it took.

Closing Prayer

"Lord Jesus, You were betrayed by a friend, falsely accused, unjustly condemned, and pushed to the margins by the very people You came to save — and from the cross, You still said, 'Father, forgive them.' Tonight we bring You every betrayal, every conflict, every injustice, every place we've been excluded or wronged. Where we need to forgive, give us grace like the grace that kept a mother rooted in her pew when hatred tried to push her out. Where we need to lay something down for someone else, give us the courage Kolbe had in that starvation cell. And as we close this series, thank You for meeting us in our spirits, our emotions, our bodies, and now our relationships — for being close to the brokenhearted in every way a heart can break. In Your holy name we pray, Amen."

And a prayer shared by Deacon Art:

Forgiveness is first
a decision made
in the sacred space
between the soul
and God.
Not because
the wound was small.
It was not small.
It kept us awake.
It broke our trust.
It left a place
we still touch
and wince.
This does not mean
the offense was right.
It does not erase
the harm
or deny the need
for truth,
justice,
and boundaries.
We name
the agony fully
because grace
does not need
our pretending.
And we forgive
because we too
have stood before God
in need of mercy,
and have been forgiven
at great cost.
Christ did not shrug at sin.
He bore it.
He entered agony
so mercy
could be real for us.
So forgiveness begins
the healing of a deeper tear:
the wound resentment
can open between
our hearts and God.
To forgive
is not to excuse
the offender.
It is to say:
my wound is real,
but Christ's mercy
is real too.
His wounds
have carried mine,
and His grace
is now mine to give.
It is to let God
repair what bitterness
would keep broken
within us.

Biblical references : Matthew 6:14–15 Ephesians 4:31–32 Colossians 3:13 Romans 5:8–9