I. Suffering: a definition
- Is it physical and mental distress?
- Is it aches and pain?
- Is it depression, embarrassment, or other states of thought?
- Is it the result of unjust aggression?
- Is it something else?

II. Suffering in the Bible
Why do people turn to the Bible?
Reasons to turn to the Bible

- It contains stories of others who have suffered
- It assists in finding meaning in one’s suffering
- It is a sacred text and tells a sacred story
- It can provide comfort, inspiration, and occasionally answers

Psalm 22 continued

“For God has not spurned or disdained the misery of this poor wretch, did not turn away from me, but heard me when I cried out. I will offer praise in the great assembly; my vows I will fulfill before those who fear him. The poor will eat their fill; those who seek the Lord will offer praise. May your hearts enjoy life forever.” (Ps 22:25-27)

III. Learning to cope with suffering
The Psalms of Lament

IV. The “why” of suffering
Sinners in the hands of an angry God

Psalm 22

“My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why so far from my call for help, from my cries of anguish?”

The classical approach: the Law of retribution
The just are rewarded and the wicked are punished
The Prophet Amos

- “Though I have made your teeth clean of food in all your cities, and have made bread scarce in all your dwellings, yet you returned not to me, says the Lord.” (Amos 4:6)
- “I hate, I spurn your feasts, I take no pleasure in your solemnities…but if you would offer me holocausts, then let justice surge like water” (Amos 5:21-24)

Joshua / Judges

- “Keep this book of the law on your lips...then you will successfully attain your goal.” (Joshua 1:8)
- “Because they had thus abandoned him...the anger of the Lord flared up against Israel, and he delivered them over to plunderers who despoiled them. He allowed them to fall into the power of their enemies...whatever they undertook, the Lord turned into disaster for them...” (Judges 2:13-15)

Atonement for sin

Animals and grain sacrifices were offered as atonement for sin

A Christian understanding of atonement

Drawing on Isaiah 52:13-53:18, the tradition of the Paschal lamb, and the tradition of Isaac, Jesus is identified as the atonement for sin in the Christian tradition

Suffering is due to other people

Are Adam and Eve responsible for their actions? Did they have free will? Did Judas act freely?

Part II

Other biblical perspectives on suffering
V. The mystery of the greater good
Redemptive suffering

Jesus Christ: a model of redemptive suffering
“Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name...Jesus Christ is Lord.” (Phil 2:6-11)

Job: two answers to suffering
- The narrative story speaks of a man who loses everything only to have it all restored to him after having suffered much; this is a variation on the law of retribution, and provides an example of God “testing” the faithfulness of his children.
- The poetry rejects the answer of the law of retribution, but fails to answer Job’s question about “why” he is suffering; Job comes to realize that it is not possible to measure divine justice by the narrow criteria of human justice.

Cur Deus homo?
St. Anselm reasoned that God became human in Christ so that the honor of God could be restored by one who is both human (but not a sinner) and divine; Christ repays the debt owed to God by humans.

Ecclesiastes
This “anti-wisdom” book states that life is meaningless and in the end, all of us will die.
Vanity of vanities, all is vanity...

- Regarding suffering, Ecclesiastes denies that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked; it simply cannot be proved.
- As to why suffering occurs, Qoheleth says that he simply doesn’t know, but he does note that suffering like joy, is also fleeting.
- There is no divine answer to suffering in Ecclesiastes.

Why do God’s people suffer?

**Prophets**
- Because they have violated God’s will and he is punishing them.

**Apocalyptic thought**
- Because of evil forces in the world that are opposed to God and all who side with him.

In the end...

- Qoheleth’s answer is that suffering simply happens, caused by circumstances we cannot control and for reasons we cannot understand.

Who causes the suffering?

**Prophets**
- God brings suffering.

**Apocalyptic thought**
- The forces opposed to God bring suffering.

Who is at fault for suffering?

**Prophets**
- The people are responsible for their own suffering; it is a punishment.

**Apocalyptic thought**
- It is the forces aligned against God who are at fault; they are persecuting those who do God’s will.

VII. God has the last word
The Apocalyptic solution

NACC October Audio Conferences – The Meaning of Suffering: Biblical Perspectives
What causes suffering?

**Prophets**

- It is the sinful activity of God’s people

**Apocalyptic thought**

- It is the upright behavior of those who side with God

How will the suffering end?

**Prophets**

- It will end when the people of God repent of their sin and return to God’s ways

**Apocalyptic thought**

- It will end when God destroys the evil forces that oppose him in the world and sets up his good kingdom for his people

When will it end?

**Prophets**

- It will end at some undisclosed future time when the people of God see the error of their ways and repent

**Apocalyptic thought**

- It will end very soon, when God intervenes in history to overthrow the forces of evil

The four tenets of apocalypticism

- Dualism
- Pessimism
- Vindication
- Imminence

Suffering: a conclusion without a solution

- 1. Some think that pain and suffering come from God as a punishment for sin (Prophets)
- 2. Some think that misery is created by human beings who abuse and oppress others (Prophets)

VIII. Suffering for the Gospel

“Rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.” (1 Pt 4:13)
3. Some think that God works in suffering to achieve his redemptive purposes (Joseph story; redemptive death of Jesus)

4. Some think that pain and misery come as a test from God to see if his people will remain faithful to him even when it does not pay to do so (folktale of Job)

5. Some think that we simply cannot know why there is suffering in the world because God chooses not to reveal this kind of information to human beings (Job’s poetry)

6. Others argue that such knowledge is beyond the understanding of human beings (Ecclesiastes)

7 a. Apocalypticists argue that God will reassert his authority in the future when he overthrows the forces of evil and vindicates all who sided with him

7 b. Christian apocalypticists believed that the reversal of fortune will happen in the afterlife, after each person dies

8. Some of the writings of the New Testament state that suffering also comes for the sake of the Gospel

1. The Bible provides multiple answers to suffering which reflect the diversity of reality that produces suffering

2. The Bible’s reflection of suffering says as much about God as it does about suffering

3. No one answer is adequate

4. There will always be cases that defy all explanation

5. Answers can never encompass the reality of suffering

6. We must do all we can to alleviate suffering