

Theology for Life

Volume 4 | Issue 2 | Summer 2017



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- ***Hope When it Hurts***—An Interview with Kristen Wetherell and Sarah Walton



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between famed preacher Charles Spurgeon and his friend
Thomas Johnson, a former slave turned preacher.

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Editor's Corner

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One of the hardest issues for both Christians and non-Christians is understanding why evil exists in the world. The philosophies, theologies, and theories that have evolved as a response to the problem of evil are as ancient as man himself. Man's obsession with the question of evil has an origin—the Garden of Eden. It's there we see, that man became a sinner by nature and by choice (Psalm 3; Romans 3). Man is entirely corrupted by sin from conception in the womb to his last days here on earth. In the Garden, Adam was charged not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Instead, of obeying that command and instructing Eve, man abdicated his responsibility. Thus the Fall of Man is absolute and devastating not only to Adam but to everyone after Adam. And this is why the Second Adam, Jesus Christ had to come to die for sin and sinners and rise again.

Only through the Second Adam, Jesus Christ, and His sinless life, death, burial, and resurrection can man have their sin forgiven. Only because the fully white-hot fury of God the Father was placed upon the Son at the time of His death on the cross can man be forgiven. It was there on the cross that the sin of man was transferred to Christ. And it's also only through the death of Christ that the image of God marred by the Fall can man be reconciled to God through His blood.

The problem of evil is a tough issue for many people. Some people have gone through trials for a long time with no end in sight. Others have lost a loved one or had a miscarriage. Others (like my wife and I) have tried to adopt, but it has fallen through. Often, people question the Lord in such instances. They wonder whether He is truly good, loving, perfect, holy, and just. And certainly, it's understandable that we have questions. Questions are not bad. The Lord can take our questions. After all, He calls us to love Him with all of our minds. But often, the problem of evil leads us to doubt the justice, holiness, and sovereignty of God. When we venture into that realm, we engage not with faith in God's Word and promises but act in unbelief.

In this issue of *Theology for Life*, we are exploring the issues of the justice, suffering, and the sovereignty of God. Through articles, reviews, and interviews, you will learn that God is not only good, He is also faithful to all that His Word says about Himself. And this is absolutely critical to understand.

We live in a bad news world. From the media to blogs, to a whole host of new media, our world is only focused on its

problems. It has no time to look up to God. It also has little concern and need in its view of God. In all the discussions of the problem of evil, of justice, and even of suffering in our world, we are at the center; instead of the Lord. Man in his natural state is at enmity against the LORD. Isis, war, economic failure, etc., all find their beginnings in the Fall of Man in the Garden. And there's glorious news here; whether you have cancer, have had a miscarriage, a failed adoption, or other debilitating diseases, illness, death in your family, or other such unfortunate situations. The good news is that we have a Lord and Savior in Jesus who is utterly sinless whose death provides our pardon and whose resurrection secured new life forever and always for the Beloved of God.

Whether you are suffering because of disease, death, miscarriage, cancer, or other illness or diseases today, we want to help you to discover for yourself through this issue of *Theology for Life* that the God of the Bible is not only good, He is also always faithful to all of His promises. The promises of God are tied to the character of our unchanging, holy, immutable and everlasting God. As such, God cannot lie. He can take all of our questions, all of our doubts, and all of our issues. He has fully revealed Himself in His Word to disclose His perfect, holy character so that we can trust Him.

As you read this issue, I'm praying for you, even now, as you face a variety of issues in your own life. My prayer as you read is that the articles, reviews, and interviews in this issue of *Theology for Life*, the Lord will minister to you. And furthermore, that the content in this issue of will help you discover perhaps for the first time how our God is just, holy, good, perfect, sovereign. In the midst of whatever suffering or injustice you are experiencing today, turn to the One in Jesus who fully paid the penalty for your sin. Jesus took upon Himself the white hot fury of His Father in your place so you could be forgiven, know God, be given a new heart with new desires, and new affections, so you could begin to live according to His design and purposes in your life.

Only when you know Him as He has revealed Himself in His Word will you be able to answer the question of the problem of evil, of why suffering exists, in the utter sufficiency of God's greatness, in the splendor of His holiness, and the goodness of His perfect justice. *Tolle lege* (pick up and read) and discover the goodness, greatness, and majesty of our God in the latest issue of *Theology for Life*.

In Christ,

Dave Jenkins
Executive Editor, *Theology for Life Magazine*

Spurgeon, Suffering, and Social Justice

By Christian George

On February 17, 1860, citizens from Montgomery, Alabama, gathered in the jail yard to burn the “dangerous books” of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the most popular preacher in the Victorian world. A newspaper recorded the event:

Last Saturday, we devoted to the flames a large number of copies of Spurgeon’s Sermons...We trust that the works of the greasy cockney vociferator may receive the same treatment throughout the South. And if the Pharisaical author should ever show himself in these parts, we trust that a stout cord may speedily find its way around his eloquent throat.

Throughout the Southern states, anti-Spurgeon bonfires were lit near bookstore, courthouses, and on plantations. Anyone who sold Spurgeon’s sermons in North Carolina faced imprisonment for “circulating incendiary publications.” What had this twenty-six-year-old London preacher—the Prince of Preachers—done to solicit so much violence in America?

Spurgeon was born on June 19, 1834, only one year after the English abolitionist William Wilberforce died. Even in his youthful preaching, Spurgeon recognized the evils of slavery and social injustice. “Ah! poor negro slave,” he said, “every scar upon your back shall have a stripe of honour in heaven.” Two years before Americans burned his sermons, Spurgeon preached:

I was once complimented by a person, who told me he believed my preaching would be extremely suitable for blacks—for negroes. He did not intend it as a compliment, but I replied, “Well sir, if it is suitable for blacks I should think it would be very suitable for whites; for there is only a little difference of skin, and I do not preach to people’s skins, but to their hearts.”

Spurgeon’s combat against slavery manifested in different ways throughout his ministry, but none more poignantly than in his friendship with Thomas L. Johnson—a former enslaved man from Richmond, Virginia, who was trained by Spurgeon at the Pastors’ College. In his memoir, *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave*, Johnson described his first encounter with Spurgeon: “His first words set me at ease, but his sympathetic kindness was beyond my highest hope...The fear all vanished, and I felt I had



been talking to a dear loving friend.”

Spurgeon’s sympathy for those suffering extended beyond slavery into London’s poorest neighborhoods. Without a proper sewage system, disease became a constant threat. During Spurgeon’s first year in London, ten thousand people died from a massive water-borne cholera outbreak that killed many in his own congregation. At risk of his own life, Spurgeon visited the sick and dying, saying:

All day, and sometimes all night long, I went about from house to house, and saw men and women dying, and, oh, how glad they were to see my face. When many were afraid to enter their houses lest they should catch the deadly disease, we who had no fear about such things found ourselves most gladly listened to when we spoke of Christ and of things Divine.

The opening lines of Charles Dickens’s 1859 novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, though written about the French Revolution, also describes the London Spurgeon knew: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” In the 1840s, half a million Irish fled the potato famine and immigrated to London. By 1857, there were 8,600 registered prostitutes, or “fallen women”, living in Spurgeon’s ministerial district. The world’s largest city struggled to cope with the surging populations. Mothers, unable to feed their infants, often resorted to throwing them into the River Thames instead of letting them starve.

Orphans could be seen at every corner. Children from the ages of three and four often slaved alongside their parents in textile factories and coal mines. Employment for children could be found, but the price was high. Cleaning London’s narrow chimneys required small hands, and many “sweeps” died in their teens from respiratory illnesses and cancers.

Spurgeon walked along the southern bank of the River Thames, weeping for those he passed. But the pastor of the largest Protestant church in Christendom did more than just weep. In 1867, an Anglican widow donated £20,000 for the construction of

an orphanage that could house 500 boys. Ten years later, a girls’ wing opened. Engraved into the stone wall beneath the archway of the orphanage were the Hebrew words “Jehovah Jireh” (the Lord will provide). Spurgeon pointed to the wall and told his friend William Hatcher, “That is my bank. It never breaks, never suspends, never gets empty. My children have never lacked for covering, or for food and I have no fear that they ever will.”

“Spurgeon led conferences in the Tabernacle to raise support for missionaries like Hudson Taylor in China.”

Spurgeon’s church, the Metropolitan Tabernacle, was described by some as a beehive of activity. There were two worship services on Sunday, a prayer service on Monday, and often an additional sermon on Thursday. Children were taught how to read and write in the basement throughout the week. Spurgeon led conferences in the Tabernacle to raise support for missionaries like Hudson Taylor in China. Thousands of copies of Spurgeon’s sermons, books, and Christian literature were printed in a workshop beside the Tabernacle and distributed by Spurgeon’s wife, Susannah, as part of her ongoing Book Fund ministry.

Spurgeon had been mentoring a group of students since 1855; however, a larger theological college was needed to train the growing number of ministers. The first stone was laid for the Pastors’ College in 1873. Spurgeon selected “Et Teneo Et Teneor” as the motto “I Hold and Am Held.” The mission of the college was to train underprivileged ministers who could not afford an education. The new facility on Temple Street allowed dozens of students to be trained, and the College exists even to this day. Every Friday, Spurgeon lectured at the Pastors’ College on preaching (later collected in a bound series entitled *Lectures to My Students*).

By June 18, 1884, one day before Spurgeon's fiftieth birthday, he had founded sixty-six ministries in London, including a clothing drive, book distribution ministry, a Sunday school for the blind, ministries to policemen, and nursing homes, among dozens more. Spurgeon personally shouldered the ministries' financial needs, funneling his book earnings back into these initiatives. The pastor who, over the course of his life, had earned multi-millions of [REDACTED] pounds died with only £2,000 to his name because he [REDACTED] gave it all away.

Spurgeon empathized with those in his city who were suffering. In 1867, he suffered his first attack of nephritis, or Bright's disease. His failing kidneys [REDACTED] chronic often left him constantly fatigued. At thirty-five, Spurgeon diagnosed with gout, an arthritic disorder, which [REDACTED] was also prevented him from even opening his hand. He once [REDACTED] claimed, "I thought a cobra had bitten me and filled my [REDACTED] veins with poison." Spurgeon's friends sent him so [REDACTED] much medicine that he once claimed he "would have been dead long ago if we had tried half of them."

"Depression added to the pastor's [Spurgeon's] problems..."

Depression added to the pastor's problems. He said, "I think it would have been less painful to have been burned alive at the stake than to have passed through those horrors and depressions of spirit." He often wept without knowing why. Susannah often found him stretched out prostrate on the floor of his study. Each winter, Spurgeon traveled to Menton, France, to escape the dreary conditions of London.

Spurgeon's suffering drove him to identify with London's beleaguered working-class. "You must go through the fire," he said, "if you would have sympathy with others who tread the glowing coals." Spurgeon also praised God for his pain, knowing that God was using his suffering to produce in him holiness, purity, and a deeper longing for heaven. Near the end of his life, Spurgeon declared:

I, the preacher of this hour, beg to bear my witness that the worst days I have ever had have turned out to be my best days, and when God has seemed most cruel to me, he has then been most kind. If there is anything in this world for which I would bless him more than for anything else, it is for pain and affliction. I am sure that in these things the richest, tenderest love has been manifested to me. Our Father's wagons rumble most heavily when they are bringing us the richest freight of the bullion of his grace. Love letters from heaven are often sent in black-edged envelopes. The cloud that is black with horror is big with mercy. Fear not the storm, it brings healing in its wings, and when Jesus is with you in the vessel the tempest only hastens the ship to its desired haven.

At 11:05 pm on January 31, 1892, Spurgeon fell into a coma from which he did not awake. His wife accompanied her husband's body from France to England. More than 100,000 people attended his funeral. B. H. Carroll, the founder of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, observed, "If every crowned head in Europe had died that night, the event would not be so momentous as the death of this one man." Even newspapers in Kansas City, Missouri, where Spurgeon's personal library would eventually reside, reported, "The death of Charles Spurgeon removes the most commanding figure in the Protestant Church."

Spurgeon once said, "I would fling my shadow through eternal ages if I could." Indeed, his shadow has spilled into our age. His love for the poor, bold Christian witness, and uncompromising stance for the preaching of the gospel continues to inspire. Through his writings and sermons, younger generations are learning about what God accomplished through the life and legacy of the Prince of Preachers.

The prophecy uttered by slave-holding booksellers about Spurgeon in the American South has proven false: “We venture the prophecy that his books in [the] future will not crowd the shelves of our Southern book merchants. They will not; they should not.” Actually, his books are becoming more widely-read today than even in his own lifetime. Who knows what spiritual fruit his ministry may one day harvest? “Who knows where my successor may be?” Spurgeon once said. “He may be in America.”

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God's Sovereignty Over Suffering and Satan's Hand in It

By John Piper

The impetus for this article comes from the ultimate reality of God as the supreme value in and above the universe. God is absolute and eternal and infinite.

Everything else and everybody else is dependent and finite and contingent. God Himself is the great supreme value. Everything else that has any value has it by connection to God. God is supreme in all things. He has all authority, all power, all wisdom — and he is all good “to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him” (Lamentations 3:25). And His name, as Creator and Redeemer and Ruler of all, is Jesus Christ.



In the few years, 9/11, Tsunami, Katrina, and ten thousand personal losses have helped us discover how little the American church is rooted in this truth. David Wells, in his new book, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World*, says it like this:

This moment of tragedy and evil [referring to 9-11] shone its own light on the Church and what we came to see was not a happy sight. For what has become conspicuous by its scarcity, and not least in the evangelical corner of it, is a spiritual gravitas, one which could match the depth of horrendous evil and address issues of such seriousness. Evangelicalism, now much absorbed by the arts and tricks of marketing, is simply not very serious anymore.” (4)

In other words, our vision of God in relation to evil and suffering was shown to be frivolous. The church has not been spending its energy to go deep with the unfathomable God of the Bible. Against the overwhelming weight and seriousness of the Bible, much of the church is choosing, at this very moment, to become more light and shallow and entertainment-oriented, and therefore suc-

cessful in its irrelevance to massive suffering and evil. The popular God of fun-church is simply too small and too affable to hold a hurricane in his hand. The biblical categories of God's sovereignty lie like landmines in the pages of the Bible waiting for someone to seriously open the book. They don't kill, but they do explode trivial notions of the Almighty.

The approach I'm taking in this article is not to solve any problem directly, but to celebrate the sovereignty of God over Satan and all the evils that Satan has a hand in. My conviction is that letting God speak his word will awaken worship — like Job's — and worship will shape our hearts to understand whatever measure of God's mystery he wills for us to know. What follows is a celebration of "Ten Aspects of God's Sovereignty Over Suffering and Satan's Hand in It." And what I mean in this message when I say that God is sovereign is not merely that God has the *power and right* to govern all things, but that he does govern all things, for his own wise and holy purposes.

1. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan's delegated world rule.

Satan is sometimes called in the Bible "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) or "the god of this world" (2 Corinthians 4:4) or "the prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2), or a "cosmic power over this present darkness" (Ephesians 6:12). Which means that we should probably take him seriously when it says in Luke 4:5–7 that "The devil took Jesus up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, 'To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.'"

And of course that is strictly true: If the sovereign of the universe bows in worshipful submission to anyone, that one becomes the sovereign of the universe. But Satan's claim that he can give the authority and glory of world kingdoms to whomever he wills is a half-truth. No doubt he does play havoc in the world by maneuvering a Stalin or a Hitler or an Idi Amin or Bloody Mary or Saddam Hussein into murderous power. But he does this only at God's permission and within God's appointed limits.

This is made clear over and over again in the Bible. For example, Daniel 2:20, "Daniel answered and said: 'Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings.'" And Daniel 4:17, "The Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will." And when the kings are in their God-appointed place, with or without Satan's agency, they are in the sway of God's sovereign will, as Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will."

"God is sovereign over the nations and over all their rulers and all the Satanic power behind them."

Evil nations rise and set themselves against the Almighty. "The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.' He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision" (Psalm 2:2–4). And do they think that their sin and evil and rebellion against him can thwart the counsel of the Lord? Psalm 33:10–11 answers, "The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations."

God is sovereign over the nations and over all their rulers and all the Satanic power behind them. They do not move without his permission, and they do not move outside his sovereign plan.

2. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan's angels (demons, evil spirits).

Satan has thousands of cohorts in supernatural evil. They are called “demons” (Matthew 8:3; James 2:19) or “evil spirits” (Luke 7:21) or “unclean spirits” (Matthew 10:1), or “the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41). We get a tiny glimpse into demonic warfare in Daniel 10 where the angel who is sent in response to Daniel's prayer says, “The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me” (Daniel 10:13). So apparently the demon, or evil spirit, over Persia fought against the angel sent to help Daniel, and a greater angel, Michael, came to his aid.

But the Bible leaves us with no doubt who is in charge in all these skirmishes. Martin Luther got it right:

*And though this world with devils filled
Should threaten to undo us
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim
We tremble not for him,
His rage we can endure
For low his doom is sure.
One little word will fell him.*

We see glimpses of those little words at work, for example, when Jesus comes up against thousands of demons in Matthew 8:29–32. They were possessing a man and making him insane. The demons cry out, “What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?” — they know a time is set for their final destruction. And Jesus spoke to them, one little word, “Go.” And they came out of the man. There is no question who is sovereign in this battle. The people have seen this before in Mark 1:27 and were amazed and said, “He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.” They obey him. As for Satan: “We tremble not for him; his rage we can endure.” But as for Christ: even though they slay him, they always must obey him! God is sovereign over Satan's angels.

3. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan's hand in persecution.

The apostle Peter describes the suffering of Christians like this: “Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world” (1 Peter 5:8–9). So the sufferings of persecution are like the jaws of a satanic lion trying to consume and destroy the faith of believers in Christ.

But do these Christians suffer in Satan's jaws of persecution apart from the sovereign will of God? When Satan crushes Christians in the jaws of their own private Calvary, does God not govern those jaws for the good of his precious child? Listen to Peter's answer in 1 Peter 3:17, “It is better to suffer for doing good, *if that should be God's will*, than for doing evil.” In other words, if God wills that we suffer for doing good, we will suffer. And if he does not will that we suffer for doing good, we will not. The lion does not have the last say. God does.

The night Jesus was arrested, satanic power was in full force (Luke 22:3; 22:31). And Jesus spoke into that situation one of his most sovereign words. He said to those who came to arrest him in the dark, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs? When I was with you day

after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But *this is your hour, and the power of darkness*” (Luke 22:52–53). “The jaws of the lion close on me tonight no sooner and no later than my Father planned. ‘No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord’ (John 10:18). Boast not yourself over the hand that made you, Satan. You have one hour. What you do, do quickly.” God is sovereign over Satan’s hand in persecution.

4. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan’s life-taking power.

The Bible does not take lightly or minimize the power of Satan to kill people, including Christians. Jesus said, in John 8:44, “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning.” John tells us, in fact, that he does indeed take the lives of faithful Christians. Revelation 2:10, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. *Be faithful unto death*, and I will give you the crown of life.”

Is God then not the Lord of life and death? He is. None lives and none dies but by God’s sovereign decree. “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand” (Deuteronomy 32:39). There is no god, no demon, no Satan that can snatch to death any person that God wills to live (see 1 Samuel 2:6).

James, the brother of Jesus says this in a stunning way in James 4:13–16:

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit” — yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “*If the Lord wills, we will live* and do this or that. As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

If the Lord wills, we will live. And if he doesn’t, we will die. God, not Satan, makes the final call. Our lives are in his hands ultimately, not Satan’s. God is sovereign over Satan’s life-taking power.

5. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan’s hand in natural disasters.

Hurricanes, tsunamis, tornados, earthquakes, blistering heat, deadly cold, drought, flood, famine. When Satan approached God in the first chapter of Job, he challenged God in verse 11, “Stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” And then the Lord said to Satan (in verse 12), “Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.”

The result was two human atrocities and two natural disasters. One of the disasters is reported to Job in verse 16: “The fire of God fell from heaven [probably lightning] and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them, and I alone have escaped to tell you.” And then the worst report of all in verses 18–19, “Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother’s house, and behold, a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead.”

Even though God had loosened the leash of Satan to do this, that is not what Job focused on. “Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord’” (Job 1:20–21). And the inspired writer added: “In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.”

Job had discovered with many of you that it is small comfort to focus on the freedom of Satan

to destroy. In the academic classroom and in the apologetics discussion, the agency of Satan in our suffering may lift a little the burden of God's sovereignty for some, but for others, like Job, there is more security and more relief and more hope and more support and more glorious truth in despising Satan's hateful hand and looking straight past him to God for the cause and for his mercy. Elihu helped Job see this mercy in Job 37:10–14. He said:

By the breath of God ice is given, and the broad waters are frozen fast. He loads the thick cloud with moisture; the clouds scatter his lightning. They turn around and around by his guidance, to accomplish all that he commands them on the face of the habitable world. Whether for correction or for his land or for love, he causes it to happen. Hear this, O Job; stop and consider the wondrous works of God.

Job's first impulses in chapter one were exactly right. When James wrote in the New Testament about the purpose of the book of Job, this is what he said, "You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful" (James 5:11).

God, not Satan, is the final ruler of wind — and the waves. Jesus woke from sleep and, with absolute sovereignty, which he had from all eternity and has this very moment, said, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm" (Mark 4:39; see Psalm 135:5–7; 148:7). Satan is real and terrible. All his designs are hateful. But he is not sovereign. God is. And when Satan went out to do Job harm, Job was right to worship with the words "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

*There's not a plant or flower below,
But makes Thy glories known;
And clouds arise, and tempests blow,
By order from Thy throne.*

("I Sing the Mighty Power of God"; Isaac Watts)

6. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan's sickness-causing power.

The Bible is vivid with the truth that Satan can cause disease. Acts 10:38 says that Jesus "went about doing good and healing all who were *oppressed by the devil*, for God was with him." The devil had oppressed people with sickness. In Luke 13 Jesus finds a woman who had been bent over unable to stand up for eighteen years. He heals her on the Sabbath and in response to the criticism of the synagogue ruler he says (in verse 16), "Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham *whom Satan bound for eighteen years*, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" There is no doubt that Satan causes much disease.

This is why Christ's healings are a sign of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God and its final victory over all disease and all the works of Satan. It is right and good to pray for healing. Christ has purchased it in the death of his Son, with all the other blessings of grace, for all his children (Isaiah 53:5). But he has not promised that we get the whole inheritance in this life. And he decides how much. We pray and we trust his answer. If you ask your Father for bread, he will not give you him a stone? If you ask him for a fish, he will not give you a serpent (see Matthew 7:9–10). It may not be bread. And it may not be a fish. But it will be good for you. That is what he promises (Romans 8:28).

But beware lest anyone say that Satan is sovereign in our diseases. He is not. When Satan went to God a second time in the book of Job, God gave him permission this time to strike Job's body. Then Job 2:7 says, "Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head." When Job's wife despaired and said, "Curse God and die" (2:9), Job responded exactly as he did before. He looked past the finite cause of Satan to the ulti-

mate cause of God and said, “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not accept evil?” (2:10).

And lest we attribute error or irreverence to Job, the writer closes the book in the last chapter by referring back to Job’s terrible suffering like this: “Then came to him all his brothers and sisters . . . and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him” (42:11). Satan is real and full of hate, but he is not sovereign in sickness. God will not give him even that tribute. As he says to Moses at the burning bush, “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?” (Exodus 4:11; see also 2 Corinthians 12:7–9).

7. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan’s use of animals and plants.

The imagery of Satan as a lion in 1 Peter 5:8 and as a “great dragon” in Revelation 12:9 and as the “serpent of old” in Genesis 3 simply makes us aware that in his destructive work Satan can, and no doubt does, employ animals and plants — from the lion in the Coliseum, to the black fly that causes river blindness, to the birds that carry the avian flu virus, to the pit bull that attacks a child, to the bacteria in your belly that Drs. Barry Marshall and Robin Warren just discovered cause ulcers (winning for them the Nobel Prize in medicine). If Satan can kill and cause disease, no doubt he has at his disposal many large and microscopic plants and animals.

But he cannot make them do what God forbids them to do. From the giant Leviathan that God made to sport in the sea (Psalm 104:26) to the tiny gnats that he summoned over the land of Egypt (Exodus 8:16–17), God commands the world of animals and plants. The most vivid demonstrations of it are in the book of Jonah. “The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah” (Jonah 1:17). And he did exactly as he had been appointed. “And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land” (Jonah 2:10). “Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah” (Jonah 4:6). “But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered” (Jonah 4:7). Fish, plant, worm — all appointed, all obedient. Satan can have a hand here, but it is not sovereign. God is.

8. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan’s temptations to sin.

Much of our suffering comes from the sins of others against us and from our own sins. Satan is called in the Bible “the tempter” (Matthew 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 3:5). This was the origin on earth of all the misery that we know — Satan tempted Eve to sin and sin brought with it the curse of God on the natural order (Genesis 3:14–19; Romans 8:21–23). Since that time Satan has been tempting all human beings to do what will hurt themselves and others.

But the most famous temptations in the Bible do not portray Satan as sovereign in his tempting work. The Bible tells us in Luke 22:3–4 that “Satan entered into Judas who was called Iscariot... And he went away and discussed with the chief priests and officers how he might betray Him to them.” But Luke tells us that the betrayal of Jesus by Judas was the fulfillment of Scripture: “The Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas” (Acts 1:16). And therefore Peter said that Jesus was “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). As with Job, the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away — the life of his Son, Jesus Christ. Satan was not in charge of the crucifixion of Christ. God was.

Even more famous than the temptation of Judas is the temptation of Peter. We usually think of Peter’s three denials, not his temptation. But Jesus says something to Peter in Luke 22:31–32 that makes plain Satan is at work here but that he is not sovereign: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And *when* you have turned again [not: *if* you turn], strengthen your brothers.” Again, as with

Job, Satan seeks to destroy Peter's faith. God gives him leash. But Jesus intercedes for him, and says with complete sovereignty, "I have prayed for you. You will fall, but not utterly. When you repent and turn back — not if you turn back — strengthen your brothers." Satan is not sovereign in the temptations of Judas or Peter or you or those you love. God is.

"But at this most critical point Satan is **not** sovereign, **God is.**"

9. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan's mind-blinding power.

The worst suffering of all is the everlasting suffering of hell. Satan is doomed to experience that suffering. Revelation 20:10 says, "The devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever."

Satan's aim is to take as many there with him as he can. To do that he must keep people blind to the gospel of Jesus Christ, because the gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). No one goes to hell who is justified by the blood of Christ. "Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God" (Romans 5:9). Only those who fail to embrace the wrath-absorbing substitutionary work of Christ will suffer the wrath of God.

Therefore, Paul says in 2nd Corinthians 4:4, "In their case the god of this world [Satan] has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." This blinding is the most deadly weapon in the arsenal of Satan. If he succeeds with a person, their suffering will be endless.

But at this most critical point Satan is not sovereign, God is. And Oh, how thankful we should be! Two verses later in 2nd Corinthians 4:6 Paul describes God's blindness-removing power over against Satan's blinding power. "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." The comparison is between God's creating light at the beginning of the world and God's creating light in the darkened human heart. With total sovereignty God said at the beginning and at your new birth, "Let there be light." And there is light.

We were dead in our trespasses and sins, but in great mercy God made us alive together with Christ (Ephesians 2:5). We were blind and spiritually dead. We saw nothing compelling or beautiful in the gospel. It was foolishness to us (1st Corinthians 1:18, 23). But God spoke with sovereign Creator authority, and his word created life and spiritual sight, and we saw the glory of Christ in the gospel and believed. Satan is a terrible enemy of the gospel. But he is not sovereign. God is. This is the reason that any of us is saved.

10. Let us celebrate that God is sovereign over Satan's spiritual bondage.

Satan enslaves people in two ways. One with misery and suffering by making us think there is no good God worth trusting. The other is with pleasure and prosperity making us think we have all we need so that God is irrelevant. To be freed from this bondage we must repent. We must confess that God is good and trustworthy. We must confess that the pleasures and prosperity of life do not compare to the worth of God. But Satan hates this repentance and does all he can to prevent it. That is his bondage.

But when God chooses to overcome our rebellion and Satan's resistance, nothing can stop him. And when God overcomes him and us, we repent and Satan's power is broken. Here it is in 2nd Timo-

thy 2:24-26:

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

Satan is not sovereign over his captives. God is. When God grants repentance, we are set free from the snare of the devil — and spend our days celebrating our liberation and spreading it to others.

Conclusion

The evil and suffering in this world are greater than any of us can comprehend. But evil and suffering are not ultimate. God is. Satan, the great lover of evil and suffering, is not sovereign. God is.

- “He does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’” (Daniel 4:35)
- He declares “The end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’” (Isaiah 46:10)
- “Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?” (Lamentations 3:37–38; see Amos 3:6)
- “Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.” (Proverbs 19:21; see 16:9)

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Theology Matters When Counseling the Suffering

By Christina Fox



Consider these ministry scenarios: you are teaching a Bible study and during a time of group discussion, a woman reveals that her husband left her for another woman. What do you say? Or someone you serve in ministry learns they have a debilitating disease of which there is no cure. Their future is dark and bleak. How do you comfort them? Perhaps a couple shares that

one of their children has denied Christ and now calls themselves an atheist. How would you help? These scenarios are not out of the realm of possibility; any of these situations could happen any time in the course of ministry. Before we consider how we would respond to someone's suffering, we must have a theology of suffering. We must know what we believe about suffering, why we suffer, and what God has done and is doing about it.

Why Does Theology Matter?

Theology, or the study of God, shapes not only our minds but our hearts as well. What we believe informs how we respond to the circumstances of life. Especially hard things. When we encounter a trial in our life, what we believe about trials, why they happen, and what our response should be, all emanates or flows out of our theology. How we endure or go through that trial also depends on what we

believe about it. This is also true for how we help someone else who is suffering.

To be honest, if we don't have a theology of suffering, how can we hold the hand of someone whose spouse just walked out on them? How can we listen to the cries of a woman who just delivered a stillborn child? How can we pray with someone who has stage four cancer? If we don't have our theology in place, hearing such stories can knock us down. It can overwhelm us and shake our faith. It can cause confusion and doubt to grow in our heart. In addition, without a theology of suffering, we can say something to the hurting that isn't Biblically true, and in so doing, we end up hurting our fellow brother or sister in the Lord even more than they already are. Or we might even lead them astray. We all need to have a theology of suffering, and not only for ministry, but also for our own lives as well.

Developing a Theology of Suffering

Many books exist on the subject but there are several factors to consider when developing a theology of suffering.

Who God Is

Theology is the study of God, therefore we must begin with God when we consider suffering. What do we believe about who God is, His character, His power, and His authority over our lives? It makes a big difference whether we believe God is sovereign over all things or whether He takes a back seat in the details of our lives. "I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things" (Isaiah 45:7).

"Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?" (Lamentations 3:37-38). It also matters whether we believe He is the Creator, Maker, and Sustainer of all things or not. "It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens" (Jeremiah 10:12). What do we believe about His character? Do we believe in His goodness? Do we believe He is holy, righteous, and just? "The LORD is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works" (Psalm 145:17).

"The Book of Job tells the store of a man who endured intense suffering."

If we believe that God is good, faithful, sovereign, and ruler over all things, then when suffering enters our lives, we must believe that He is sovereign over that suffering as well. We must believe that such suffering is under His control. We must trust He will use it for our ultimate good and His glory.

Origins of Suffering

Another element to a theology of suffering is in understanding the origins of suffering. When God created the world, suffering did not exist; everything God made was good. When God created our first parents, they only knew joy and peace. They were never sick. They never spoke an unkind word to one another. They lived in perfect harmony with each other and with their Maker. There was no loss, sorrow, or tears. Until the day they both disobeyed God and ate from the tree of which they were forbidden to eat. Sin then entered the world and with it suffering. Sickness and death entered the world. Loss and sorrow. Fear and loneliness. Injustice and violence. War and poverty. All the suffering we know and experience today finds its origins in the fall of Adam and Eve.

The Why of Suffering

When suffering enters anyone's life, we all want to know, "Why?" The why of suffering is an area in which we all stumble. We think we can figure out why something has happened, and in so doing, perhaps we can get to the end of it and make it go away.

The Book of Job tells the story of a man who endured intense suffering. In the blink of an eye,

he lost all his children, his wealth, and his health. After this tragedy, Job's friends came to be with him and talked to him about all that happened. The problem was their theology. They believed good behavior resulted in blessing and bad behavior resulted in punishment. If you lived a good life, good things happened to you and the opposite if you did not. So when Job lost everything, his friends assumed Job must have disobeyed God in some profound way. Much of the book of Job documents each friend taking turns trying to get Job to admit to some kind of wrongdoing. But Job was an upright man; he loved and served God. We know from reading Job that his suffering was not because of something he had done but because Satan came before God and asked permission to bring suffering into his life (Job 1:9-12). Job's losses were not because God was punishing him for sin, but because there were lessons God wanted to teach him through his suffering: there were things he needed to learn about God.

The same theology still existed in Jesus' day when the disciples asked Jesus about a man born blind. They asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). Jesus responded, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."

This is a common error we all can make, assuming we know why something has happened in someone's life or even trying to figure out the reasons why. But we can't assume. We don't do a sufferer any good when we try to figure it out for them. When we study God's word on the subject of suffering, we see that there are multiple uses and purposes for suffering in our lives (see James 1:2-4, Romans 5:3-4, 2nd Corinthians 12:9-10, 2nd Corinthians 1:3-4). We know that all suffering is for God's glory and our ultimate spiritual good. But sometimes we don't see all the good in this life. Job never knew about the encounter Satan had with God which precipitated his suffering. Much of the time, we have to trust in God's promises, His sovereignty, and in His goodness, knowing that even if we don't know why something has happened, God is in it and He will ultimately redeem it.

"Because of Jesus, there is an end to suffering. Because He conquered sin and death, we have hope of eternity."

God's Response to Suffering

The story of suffering doesn't end with Adam and Eve being barred from the Garden. God sent them out with a promise that a seed would come and one day defeat Satan (Genesis 3:15). The rest of the Bible tells the story of that promised Redeemer. When a sufferer wonders if God even cares about the suffering in this world, we can answer with an emphatic, *yes!* God cares so much that He sent His only Son into the world. Jesus is God in the flesh, Immanuel. He lived in this fallen world, experiencing all the heartache, sorrow, suffering, and temptation we experience, yet He didn't sin. He became the perfect sacrifice to take our place and receive the punishment our sins deserve. He bore our sins on the cross, died, was buried, and rose from the dead, conquering sin and death. Jesus is the suffering servant, the man of sorrows, the one who sweat drops of blood, knowing the suffering He would endure for our sakes, yet "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

The End of Suffering

Because of Jesus, there is an end to suffering. Because He conquered sin and death, we have the hope of eternity. One day He will return and make all things new. We will dwell with Him forever. This is His promise and our comfort. "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with

them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:3-4).

Knowing what we believe and why about suffering is essential to helping someone else who is suffering. We must have a theology of suffering. We need to study God’s Word to learn more. We need to know what we believe and why. Then we can go and comfort fellow sufferers with the comfort and hope found in Christ our Savior.

The Prosperity Gospel: A Global Epidemic

By Costi Hinn

Prosperity is hot topic in the church. Does God care if a pastor drives a nice car or lives in a nice home?

Does God command that all who follow Him take a vow of poverty and starve their families in a protest of earthly comfort? Bible teachers sell millions of books and accumulate mass amounts of wealth, are they in the same league as other wealthy preachers? Some men will have deep convictions about attaining any

measure of wealth, while others will be content use their wealth to give back to their church. Some will use their wealth to fund a child's college tuition, or even scholarship a seminary student. Others will invest their wealth with the goal of giving even more away in the future. Stewardship comes in all shapes and sizes but one thing doesn't—God's ability to weigh a man's heart and motives. It is a man's heart that God is most interested in and the gospel a man proclaims that God will judge most. When Heaven's final bell rings and every man is recompensed according to his deeds, God will have the final say. The issue will not be whether that pastor took home a six-figure salary; the issue will be what that man taught and wrote while representing the gospel of Jesus Christ.



In this article, the prosperity gospel is placed front and center as one of the deadliest teachings in the world today. It has attached itself to the Bible, and to Jesus Christ—though it has no business doing so. Billions chase after it in search of stability and hope. Yet, all those who live and die trusting in the prosperity gospel for salvation will be left wanting in both this life, and the next.

What is Prosperity Gospel Theology?

A very basic definition of the prosperity gospel can be described as this: God's plan is for you to live your best life *now*. Health, wealth, and happiness are guaranteed on Earth for all who follow Jesus. Heaven is simply the eternal extension of your temporal blessings. The prosperity gospel's theological foundation can be traced to at least three twisted versions of biblical truths. Prosperity preacher's twist these in order to legitimize their version of the gospel.

Christ's Atonement Means Abundant Life Now

The Bible clearly teaches that Christ died to atone for our sin (Isaiah 53) and that because of what He accomplished through His death and resurrection, we'll experience the abundant life that He came to give us (John 10:10). Though we enjoy some benefits of the atonement now—such as the forgiveness of our sins and assurance of salvation—His atonement guarantees eternal promises that *won't* be fully realized until Heaven. We'll receive a glorified body, there will be no death, no sin, no pain, no suffering, and no disease! Those are just a *few* of the eternal benefits of the atonement. Best of all, we'll enjoy perfect fellowship with our God forever more. Prosperity preachers teach that health and wealth were "paid for" in the atonement—just like sin. Therefore, this twisted interpretation allows them to teach people to expect complete healing, monetary riches, and total victory in every area of their *earthly* life. Instead of telling people to put faith in Jesus Christ and excitedly await their best life in heaven, they offer an empty gospel that promises people their best life now.

God's Covenant with Abraham Means Inheritance Now

There's an old children's song that goes something like this: *"Father Abraham had many sons. Many sons had Father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you. So let's just praise the Lord!"* It's

"Thus far, it is mainly the prosperity preachers who are benefitting from the offerings of those they deceive."

used by many faithful Christians as a way to teach children about the great joy associated with God's covenant with Abraham. Specifically speaking, the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12:1-3) has much to do with redemption, and God's promises to His people. However, prosperity preacher's use the covenant as a means to promise an inheritance (usually land and money) for their followers now. This has become their most common use for it. In the prosperity gospel, God's covenant with Abraham is littered with statements like, "If you'll sow a seed of faith like Abraham, God will bless you", or "If you speak it and live it by faith like Abraham, God will prosper you." These type of statements are a way to present any temporal or eternal inheritance that awaits God's people as a blanket guarantee. If these twisted versions of the Abrahamic covenant were true, then the millions who trust in the prosperity gospel would become millionaires and land-owners overnight. Thus far, it is mainly the prosperity preachers who are benefitting from the offerings of those they deceive.

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Faith is a Force You Can Use to Control God

The Bible teaches that Christians are justified by faith (Romans 5:1), that Christians overcome the world through faith (1st John 5:5), and that Christians live by faith because of what Christ has done (Galatians 2:20). The list of verses on the blessings of faith is endless! Faith pleases God, is directly related to salvation, and is the evidence of trust in God for the believer. Prosperity gospel preachers depart from this orthodox teaching on faith when they teach that faith is a force you can use to get what you want from God. In other words, you were able to obtain salvation and justification by faith, so why can't you obtain a Ferrari the same way? Prosperity theology is centered on the notion that right believing, right thinking, and right speaking are all linked with faith in order to create physical blessings. This is where the word of faith movement also hybrids with the prosperity gospel.

How Did the Prosperity Gospel Get So Popular?

Long before the Catholic Church was selling indulgences, the correlation between ministry, money, and manipulation was crystal clear. The Bible even describes Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:9-24) as a magician who thought he could buy the gift of God with money. Specifically speaking, the modern day roots of the prosperity gospel go back approximately seventy years. It was during the 1950's that this divergent gospel pioneered its way into the mainstream evangelical scene and nobody at the time could have imagined that it would spread across the globe. Born in 1918, Granville "Oral" Roberts was, in many ways, the lead prosperity pioneer. He went from being a local pastor, to building a multi-million dollar empire based on one major theological premise: *God wanted people to be healthy and wealthy*. Oral Roberts didn't mince words about his version of Jesus or the gospel. He adamantly taught and defended his belief that Jesus' highest wish is for us to prosper materially and have physical health equal to His peace and power in our soul. He twisted the Bible to make his point and would teach that it was Jesus who said, in 3rd John 1:2, "*Beloved, I wish above all things that thou may prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth,*" when in fact that was the Apostle John's loving way of greeting his readers at the time. John's greeting is comparable to the first line of many of our modern day e-mails that begin with, "Hi! I hope everything is going well for you."

Bestselling books by Roberts often brought the two distinct teachings of the prosperity gospel and the word of faith movement together under one roof. His books brandished catchy titles such as, *If You Need Healing Do These Things*, *The Miracle of Seed-Faith*, *A Daily Guide to Miracles*, and *Successful Living through Seed-Faith*. Desperate crowds could hardly resist his big promises and they ignored the fact that Roberts was butchering Bible—namely, the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. Big crowds and big money had blinded both Roberts, and those who followed him.

Today, the prosperity gospel has exploded to become one of the most popular teachings in the world. It has overtaken continents like Africa, and South America as it continues to breed pastors and people who are looking to land a serious pay-day.

How Can a Pastor Preach Against it?

It's a proven fact that the best way to spot counterfeit money is to become an expert in what real money looks (and even feels) like. Knowing the right stuff about the real thing protects you from being fooled. The best way that a pastor can strengthen his flock and protect them from being deceived is to teach them faithfully about the truth. Any seminar, series, or conference on false teaching should

always be paired with clear biblical truth, not merely a protest concerning errors.

Here are three ways that a pastor can move from only protesting errors, to also preaching the truth:

Teach a Biblical View on Prosperity

The people of God need to know and understand that prosperity does not validate a person's salvation. No amount of money, awards from an employer, or inheritance from relatives can act as a "sign" that God's hand is upon someone's life. The blessing of salvation can rest upon an orphan just as much as a king. God is not a respecter of persons. Next, a biblical view of prosperity will teach people that the preacher's message is not validated by his own wealth. For example, many prosperity preachers will use their own net worth as proof that God is blessing them and therefore, their message is trustworthy. This is unacceptable. Finally, prosperity does not validate a church's doctrine. Much like the pastor's message, a church may think big offerings and big crowds are evidence that God is pleased with their ministry. Undoubtedly, God is more likely pleased with a church of 80 who is faithful yet poor, than He is with a church of 8,000 who is rich yet false.

"What debunks the prosperity gospel as well as anything? A high view of Heaven to come!"

Teach a Biblical View of Sovereignty

A pastor will raise up a healthy and humble congregation if they are consistently taught that God controls all things—including prosperity. While it is man who is encouraged to work hard (Proverbs 6:6-8) and to be wise stewards (Proverbs 21:5), it is God who graciously pours out riches on whom He desires (Proverbs 10:22). It is also God who allows the poor to have joy while in poverty! Paul taught, in 2nd Corinthians 9:6-15, that Christians ought to be generous, but it is God who gives most. His grace is seen through the care of His children. This may include monetary wealth, or it may not. Trusting God unconditionally is the best way to live. Job learned this lesson well as he humbly said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21).

Teach a Biblical View of Eternity

What debunks the prosperity gospel as well as anything? A high view of Heaven to come! What causes the church to shift its focus from obtaining earthly riches and putting energy into the Great Commission? A view of Heaven to come! Pastors must preach that our best life now is obeying Christ, that our best life now is spreading the gospel, and that our best life now can never compare to heaven. Mission-minded churches have very little time and energy to waste on being money-minded. Stewardship is to be employed for the furtherance of the gospel. Fundraising campaigns must have gospel-centered visions. The pulpit ministry is to be consistent in presenting money as a vehicle for doing *more* ministry—not having more "stuff".

What is the Next Step?

One final note on how pastors can preach against the prosperity gospel: Get involved with or-

ganizations who are training pastors and sending resources to continents where this false gospel is an epidemic. There are many bold missionaries who know firsthand that the prosperity gospel is infiltrating their mission field more than any other type of teaching. They need our help. If pastors will enter the pulpit full of zeal for the truth, and people will leave the pew full of zeal for their commission, perhaps by God's grace a generation will crush the momentum of the prosperity gospel for the glory of God, and the joy of future generations.

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Being There: How to Love Those Who are Hurting

An Interview with Dave Furman

By Dave Jenkins



Dave Furman (ThM, Dallas Theological Seminary) serves as the senior pastor of Redeemer Church of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, which he planted in 2010. Dave and his wife, Gloria, have four children. He is the author of *Being There: How to Love Those Who Are Hurting*.

T4L: Thank you very much for agreeing to do this interview with Theology for Life Magazine, Pastor Furman. Can you tell us a bit about yourself, including the current ministries you are involved in?

Dave Furman: I've been married to Gloria for almost 15 years and we have four wonderful children. My wife and I met in Texas after finishing college and have lived in the Middle East for the past nine years. We moved to Dubai in 2008 to start a church in the center of the city.

Our journey has been quite difficult as I developed a neurological disorder in both of my arms before we moved overseas. My disability means I am not able to drive, buckle my seatbelt, pick up our children, get dressed on my own, or lift more than my 11" MacBook Air.

My pain also led me to a period of deep depression and despair about 18 months prior to our church being planted. Those were dark days and I felt like my marriage, ministry, body, and mental state were all

being destroyed.

In God's kindness, in the months before the launch of Redeemer Church of Dubai, I had a re-discovery of the Gospel in my life. I began to realize that the Gospel is not just for unbelievers, but for Christians too. I began to marvel at the glories of the Gospel and the fact that Jesus Christ died on the cross to save me from my sin. Diving deeper into the riches of the Gospel had a massive effect on me as the truth warmed my heart once again.

T4L: Wow, that's quite the journey so far! I can see how this would lead to writing your book. So, how do Christians find hope in the midst of suffering?

Dave Furman: Suffering is a pain. It's not good. Sickness, disease, and death are result of the Fall and are normal occurrences in a fallen world. How do we find hope in the midst of suffering? We must look forward to the day when these things will be gone forever in glory. There will be a day when death will die. Imagine that. Death dead! The greatest hope a Christian can look forward to in midst of their suffering is that their suffering is not the final chapter in the story. We will be with Jesus face-to-face worshipping him with all believers from all times and we'll do it forever. Revelation 21-22 is our greatest hope.

"When you are sympathizing with a friend, you might be tempted to compare their pain with something you've experienced in the past..."

T4L: So true! With that in mind, how do we be a faithful friend while people around us go through suffering?

Dave Furman: It's really important to be a faithful friend to those around us who are suffering. We may think that the best way to be a friend is to have all the right answers. However, more often than not we really have no idea why our friends are suffering. Instead, the best thing we can do for our hurting friends is to just be there for them. *Be a friend.* Being a listening ear can go a long way in caring for someone who is hurting.

Another thing we can do is to pledge specific help and then just do it. When we say things like, "Friend, just let me know if you ever need anything and I'll help you," it sounds kind and helpful. We've all said it, but there's a more thoughtful approach. Because let's be honest, for many of us, asking for help goes against every fiber of our being. Even after being disabled for the past decade it's still a battle for me to admit weakness and ask someone to help me open a bottle of water or get the door for me. What we want to do is make it as easy as possible for someone to ask for help. When you pledge general help to someone in need, it's not likely that your friend will take you up on the offer. Sometimes a general offer of help just makes us feel good about ourselves.

When we pledge general help, we put the burden on the hurting; we expect *them* to come up with a way for us to help. That's a tough assignment to put on someone grieving or in pain. They may not even be thinking clearly, and now they have to come up with ways they can be helped. Instead, we should figure out what our hurting friends need, and then just do something.

T4L: That's a great point. I doubt many people have considered that. What are some things to do and to avoid when ministering to those going through suffering?

Dave Furman: There are several things we should avoid when ministering to a friend who is suffer-

ing. I'll mention a few of the ways here.

1) Don't be the fix-it person. You may find that you want to do whatever you can to help your friend. That's a good instinct, but this desire could lead you to being like a "doctor" to your friend—always wanting to dissect the person's problems and find another ointment or treatment that's guaranteed to cure them. However, unless your friend isn't seeing a doctor, they already have as much medical advice as they need.

"The local church should be on the front lines in caring for the hurting."

2) Don't play the comparison game.

When you are sympathizing with a friend, you might be tempted to compare their pain with something you've experienced in the past. "I remember the time my grandfather passed away" or "My legs hurt once, it was horrible." This never helps someone feel better but merely draws the attention to yourself.

3) Don't make their pain their identity. Another way we can hurt the hurting is by making their pain their identity. We do this by bringing it up all the time. We're asking them about it every time we see them. We won't let them forget they have pain! The other extreme to avoid is to not mention it at all and to play the avoidance game. We need to work hard to strike a balance of inquiring about your friends' pain, but not making that friend's pain their identity.

T4L: Hmm, yes. I've personally fallen into that pitfall of playing the "comparison game". It can be hard not to... That leads me to my next question: How do we have hard conversations with those who are hurting?

Dave Furman: Having hard conversations is very important when you minister to those who are suffering. Our suffering doesn't cause us to sin, but it does bring out sinful tendencies that were already inside our heart. As you minister to hurting friends, you'll want to look for opportunities to speak into that person's life. You want to do this gently and at the right time—all with grace and loving care. And much prayer!

T4L: That's good advice for one-on-one interactions. How should local church pursue the hurting?

Dave Furman: The local church should be on the front lines in caring for the hurting. Pastors should encourage members to "bear each other's burdens" in sermons and other instruction. Members should all be on the unofficial care team always looking for those who are hurting. Our prayer should be that our churches would always be growing as a culture of care. By overflowing in love for the hurting we show each other and the world a little bit about what Jesus is like. It adorns the gospel words we speak as a church.

T4L: Well, thank you for your time! We hope you'll join us again for another interview soon!

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Russell Moore, President, The Ethics & Religious
Liberty Commission



Preaching to Sufferers

By David E. Prince



All people suffer. All Christians suffer. In fact, Christians suffer in unique ways because of their faith commitment. After being stoned and left for dead, the apostle Paul exhorted the disciples to understand, “It is necessary to go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). No matter how many safeguards we build into our lives, we cannot keep suffering from invading them. Preaching to sufferers is another way of saying preaching to people. Everyone is somewhere on the suffering spectrum. But this realization does not lead

to fatalism, because the Bible makes clear the suffering is not purposeless in God’s world.

One lack in much contemporary preaching is the failure to proceed with an understanding that we preach as sufferers, to sufferers. Of all people, Christian preachers ought to know this. After all, an unjust crucifixion is at the very heart of our faith. Every sermon is an act of spiritual war as we prepare listeners to engage in the harsh reality of kingdom warfare for the glory of our Messianic King.

Preach the Sufferings of Christ

No consideration of Christian preaching to sufferers can be reckoned complete without reference to Jesus’ own exegesis and proclamation after his crucifixion to a couple of suffering and dejected disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-49). As the disciples trudged down the road from Jerusalem, they unknowingly encountered the risen Christ. They had heard rumblings about an empty tomb, but of all of the explanations that entered their minds resurrection was not one of them. They were convinced that their hope had died along with Jesus. Jesus’ response was a rather stiff rebuke: “O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!” (Luke 24:25).

Why the rebuke? To awaken them to what the Old Testament prophets had written and what He had been teaching them as well, He was the suffering messianic servant, and all Scripture is about Him. According to Jesus, the Old Testament Scriptures teach that it was necessary for the Messiah to “suffer these things and to enter into His glory” (Luke 24:26). Jesus taught that He was the hermeneutical key for understanding all Scriptural revelation and that His suffering on the cross was central

and indispensable to His messianic mission. The motif of suffering is one of the most fundamental factors that shaped Jesus’ own preaching of the kingdom. Suffering is at the heart of the Christian Gospel story.

“At Paul’s conversion, the Lord said, “For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” (Acts 9:6)”

Jesus’ crucifixion (His own purposeful suffering) is at the heart of all questions about theodicy (why God allows suffering in the world). Peter’s Pentecost sermon declared, “This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up” (Acts 2:23-24). Jesus’ suffering did not thwart God’s purpose, nor did the

men’s lawless actions, both accomplished God’s plan. We must join Paul by deciding to know nothing in our sermons apart from “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1st Corinthians 2:2). Because as John Stott writes, “He suffered for us, dying in our place in order that we might be forgiven. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of his.”

Preach as a Fellow-Sufferer

Another pervasive theme in the Scripture is that God graciously identifies with sufferers: “I know their sufferings” (Exodus 3:7); “Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker” (Proverbs 14:31); “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation” (Psalm 68:5); “From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight” (Psalm 72:14). Some of our sufferings come as a consequence of our sinful actions, but there is also a great deal of suffering that is merely the result of living in a fallen world distorted by sin. The key to facing our suffering is not found in sorting out the difference, but in knowing that either can be redemptive.

Christ suffered, not that we might not suffer, but that in our suffering we could become more like Him. In communicating this cruciform worldview to the congregation, Paul, writing from prison, tethers his preaching ministry to suffering. He writes, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Colossians 1:24). Paul explains his missionary preaching in this way: “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Colossians 1:28). He describes the labor of this kind of preaching as “toil” and “struggling” (Colossians 1:29).

At Paul’s conversion, the Lord said, “For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:16). In Colossians, Paul explains his sufferings as a vital way he served the church by proclaiming the sufferings of Christ from a life that illustrated suffering. Paul’s point is not that the afflictions of Christ lack in atoning power or sacrificial merit. Absolutely not! Paul’s language of “filling up” what is “lacking” in Jesus’ sufferings is not about propitiation but rather presentation. In defending his authority to preach the Gospel, Paul focused on his weakness, not strength, and his

suffering, not success. In following Paul, the preacher's focus must reflect his own need of the Gospel in the face of suffering, as the Gospel's power is being proclaimed to others.

Paul described his ministry as "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus" (2nd Corinthians 4:10). His suffering in the midst of proclamation was personally costly, but it was the ground where he experienced Christ's life-giving power in Him and through Him: "So death is at work in us, but life in you" (2nd Corinthians 4:12). It is not too much to say that, for Paul, proclamation through suffering was central to his preaching model. The preacher must be the lead witness of Christ in a community of witnesses (Greek: *martys*, *marturia*; see Revelation 2:13, 6:9, 11:7, 12:11, 20:4).

Preach the Eschatological Kingdom

The entire biblical narrative is infused with gospel-centered eschatological hope. It would be too much to say that theology is eschatology, but it would be too little to say anything less than that all theology is eschatological. The Scripture is rightly recognized as Christian because every part is organically connected to the *telos* (end, goal) of Scripture: Christ and His eschatological kingdom. Tragically, eschatology is often considered a non-essential and specialized theological category, exclusively the domain of academic theologians, theology nerds, or wild-eyed chart toting and date setting end-times fanatics (who are often avoiding the genuine personal implications of biblical eschatology).

The Bible directs all divine and human acts toward a cosmic apex. The promise of God in Genesis 3:15 is not only the first Gospel; it is the first eschatology. The tragic events in the Garden of Eden disrupted the harmony of the entire created order and brought suffering. But the shame and alienation experienced after the Fall into sin would not be the final word— God's eschatological grace would be. Sermons that treat eschatology merely as a doctrinal category or an addendum to the biblical story fail to adequately acknowledge the ubiquitous hope that pervades the entire Bible. Jesus is the eschatological man and His people, the Church, represent the eschatological kingdom community who heed His voice and eagerly await consummation of His kingdom.

Our sermons must communicate that the believer lives in the overlap of the ages, a time of constant warfare, a time in which God is at work rescuing sinners "from the domain [kingdom] of darkness" and transferring them "to the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13). Anything less obscures the cosmic, hope-filled implications of the Gospel. The believer presently participates in the age to come, while at the same time living in this sin-filled suffering world. As George Eldon Ladd explains, "Because of Christ's death, the justified person stands already on the age-to-come side of the eschatological judgment, acquitted of all guilt... Thus, believers live in a tension of experienced and anticipated eschatology."

Theologian Thomas Finger contends that for the first Christians, "Their eschatology was not merely a set of beliefs concerning future events but also the attitude or atmosphere aroused by these events." Effective preaching to sufferers conveys this atmosphere of eschatological hope in every sermon. A hope sourced in the ultimate triumph of the Gospel of the Kingdom of Christ. In Peter's first epistle, he begins by pointing to "the sufferings of Christ" and "the subsequent glories" (1st Peter 1:11). Throughout, he mentions various sufferings and follows it with glory. By the end of the letter, any mention of suffering brings to mind glory. His final word is to those who shepherd the flock with the word, who are "a witness to the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed" (1st Peter 5:1). They "will receive the unfading crown of glory" (1st Peter 5:4).

In much contemporary preaching, the Gospel is too frequently an addendum and not the energizing center and eschatological hope of our sermons. We often preach as if we are trying to help good people become a bit more successful. When Christian growth is abstracted from the Gospel in our sermons, and the preacher is known more for his intelligence, personality, and having it all together, rather than his need of and passion for the Gospel. When suffering is ignored, with sentimentality offered as hope rather than eschatological Gospel glory, then the pulpit has become a rhetorical narcotic for the wisdom of the world. Such a pulpit is at odds with Christ and accuses the suffering brothers rather than providing them genuine hope.

Only sermons that preach the sufferings of Christ, preached by fellow-sufferers, and filled with the “already/not yet” hope of the eschatological kingdom of Christ can strengthen struggling sufferers to resist the devil and grow in grace. Our sermons must join Peter in calling listeners to, “Resist [the devil], firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you” (1st Peter 5:10).

Five Truths About the Wrath of God

By Joseph Scheumann



The doctrine of the Wrath of God has fallen on hard times.

In today's world, any concept of God's wrath upsets our modern sentiments. It's too disconcerting, too intolerant. We live in a day where we have set ourselves as the judge and God's character is on trial. "How can hell be just?" "Why

would God command the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites?" "Why does God always seem so angry?"

The fact that so many people struggle with these questions, and many more like them, means that more than ever right thinking is needed about the doctrine of God's wrath. It is needed for motivation for Christian living, fuel for proper worship, and as a toolbox to confront objections to Christianity. Here are **five biblical truths** about the wrath of God:

1. God's wrath is just.

It has become common for many to argue that the God of the Old Testament is a moral monster that is by no means worthy of worship. However, biblical authors have no such problem. In fact, God's wrath is said to be in perfect accord with God's justice. Paul writes, "But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (Romans 2:5). God's wrath, then, is in proportion to human sinfulness.

"God's wrath is His love in action against sin." Similarly, Proverbs 24:12 says, "If you say, 'Behold, we did not know this,' does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it, and will he not repay man according to his work?"

J.I. Packer summarizes: "God's wrath in the Bible is never the capricious, self-indulgent, irritable, morally ignoble thing that human anger so often is. It is, instead, a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil" (*Knowing God*, 151).

2. God's wrath is to be feared.

God's wrath is to be feared because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). God's wrath is to be feared because we are justly condemned sinners apart from Christ (Romans 5:1). God's wrath is to be feared because he is powerful enough to do what he promises (Jeremiah 32:17). God's wrath is to be feared because God promises eternal punishment apart from Christ (Matthew 25:46).

3. God's wrath is consistent in the Old and New Testament.

It is common to think of the Old Testament God as mean, harsh, and wrath-filled, and the God of the New Testament as kind, patient, and loving. Neither of these portraits are representative of Scripture's teaching on the wrath of God. We find immensely fearful descriptions of the wrath of God in both the Old and the New Testament. Here are just a few examples:

- Behold the storm of the Lord! Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest; it will burst upon the head of the wicked. (Jeremiah 30:23)
- The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. (Nahum 1:2)
- For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. (Romans 1:18)
- From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. (Revelation 19:15)

4. God's wrath is His love in action against sin.

This is counter-intuitive, but hear me out. God is love, and God does all things for His glory (1 John 4:8; Romans 11:36). He loves His glory above all (and that is a good thing!). Therefore, God rules the world in such a way that brings Himself maximum glory. This means that God must act justly and judge sin (i.e. respond with wrath), otherwise God would not be God. God's love for his glory motivates his wrath against sin. Admittedly, God's love for His own glory is a most sobering reality for many and not good news for sinners. It is after all, "a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31).

5. God's wrath is satisfied in Christ.

"In saving us from his own wrath, God has done what we could not do, and he has done what we didn't deserve." Here we have the ultimate good news: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). Because of Christ, God can rightly call sinners justified (Romans 3:26). God has done what we could not do, and He has done what we didn't deserve. Charles Wesley rightly exulted in this good news:

*And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain!
For me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*

The Suffering of Christ and the Sovereignty of God

By Matthew Adams



As we examine the topic of the suffering of Christ and sovereignty of God, we see that it is one that many people face and struggle with mightily. In this article, we will begin the journey through this topic by considering what is said in the Book of Revelation. In Revelation 13:8, as the Apostle John is in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, he writes, "All who dwell on earth will worship [the beast], everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain."

Something very important things must be noted here: before the world was created there was a book called the "*Book of Life of the Lamb who was Slain*". The Lamb is Jesus Christ crucified. The book is the book of Jesus Christ crucified. Therefore, before God made the world, He had in His sovereign view His son, Jesus Christ, slain. Which means that our Sovereign God had in view a people purchased by His blood, whose names were written in this book.

Therefore, the suffering of Jesus was not an afterthought or a "Plan B". There are many who believe that God's work of creation did not go the way He planned. This text puts this idea to rest because, before the foundation of the world, God had a book called "the book of life of the Lamb who was slain". The suffering of Christ was in view *before* the work of creation began.

Overflowing Grace

Yet, something else is in the sight of our Sovereign God before the foundations of the world. In 2nd Timothy 1:9, Paul looks back into eternity past and says that God saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of His own purpose and grace, which He gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.

What does Paul mean here? Our sovereign God gave His people undeserved favor—grace—in Christ Jesus before the ages began. The world had not yet been created; God's people had not yet been created. Yet, God had already decreed that this blood-bought grace of Christ would be sufficient for His people. So there is a "book of life of the Lamb who was slain", and there is an overflowing grace flowing to undeserving sinners who are not yet created. Therefore, before the foundations of the world, the slaughter of the Son of God is in the mind and plan of God. His people will be forgiven and restored through the Lamb of God will suffer. That's the plan.

To the Praise of His Glorious Grace

But for what purpose is God's plan? To answer this, a major Scriptural text needs to be examined. In Ephesians 1:4-6, Paul says, "Even as [God] chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved."

"And, as sin enters the world in Genesis 3, the stage is set..."

The goal of the entire history of redemption is to bring praise and glory to the name of our Sovereign God. And it is clear here that, as Paul writes, this plan happened "in Christ", with the suffering of Christ in His mind. To put it as simplest as possible, our calling, justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification could not happen apart from the suffering and death of Christ.

Therefore, Paul is proclaiming that God chose us "in Christ" and planned to adopt us "through Christ." This was the plan of the suffering and death of His Son, set before the foundation of the world. Furthermore, Paul makes plain that the goal of this plan was to bring about "the praise of the glory of the grace of God".

And, as sin enters into the world in Genesis 3, the stage is set. The drama of redemptive history begins to develop. Sin is now in full and deadly force. Suffering and death are near and prepared to consume the Son of God when He comes. All things are now in place for the greatest possible display of the glory of the grace of God.

Therefore, in the fullness of time, God sent His Son into the world to suffer in the place of sin-

ners. Every facet of His saving work was accomplished by suffering. In the life and death of Christ, He displays the greatness of the glory of the grace of God!

Everything that Christ accomplished for sinners, He accomplished by suffering. Christ took on the wrath of God on our behalf. Christ bore our sins and secured our forgiveness. Christ lived a perfect life in our place and that righteousness is imputed to us. Christ defeated death. Christ destroyed the works of the devil. Christ obtained our glorification. Christ will ultimately bring us to God. Christ did this all through His suffering.

The Lamb Who Was Slain

In closing, consider this from Revelation 5:9-12. It is here that the multitudes in heaven are worshipping the Lamb. And why were they worshipping the Lamb? They worship Him because He was slain and worthy to open the scroll! See this glorious picture of the worship in Heaven:

And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"

All of heaven focuses their worship not simply on the Lamb, but specifically the "Lamb who was slain". And they are still singing this song! Clearly, the centerpiece of worship in heaven for all eternity will be the display of the glory of the grace of God in the slaughtered Lamb.

The heavenly multitude and all the redeemed will sing of the suffering of Christ forever and ever. The suffering of the Son of God will never be forgotten. The sovereign plan of the Lord and of our suffering Servant will be at the center of our worship for all eternity. As previously mentioned, and a humbling fact, this is not an afterthought to God. This is the plan from before the foundation of the world. This plan displays the greatness of the glory of the grace of our Sovereign in the suffering of the Beloved is what will be enjoyed forever and ever by His people in heaven!

St. Augustine on the Problem of Evil

By Greg Koukl



Is God the author of evil or its helpless victim? St. Augustine's answer has been the most intellectually credible and emotionally satisfying solution to this vexing problem.

One doesn't need a Ph.D. in theology to look around the world and realize something is desperately wrong. The existence of evil is one of the most vexing challenges a Christian—or any person, for that matter—must grapple with. It's occupied the minds of great Christian thinkers since the beginning, including St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.). For much of his life he worked hard at a solution. Augustine's approach was not just brilliant; it was practical. His insight is intellectually credible *and* emotionally satisfying in that it gives hope and offers meaning to the Christian trying to make sense out of life in a fallen world.

Two Aspects of the Problem

The problem of evil can be phrased in several ways. One approach addresses the origin of evil, prompting the syllogism (a series of statements that form a reasoned argument): (1) God created all

things; (2) evil is a thing; (3) therefore, God created evil. If the first two premises are true, the conclusion is inescapable. This formulation, if sustained, is devastating for Christianity. God would not be good if He knowingly created evil.

Augustine realized that the solution was tied to the question: What is evil? The argument

above depends on the idea that evil is a *thing* (note the second premise). But what if evil is not a "thing" in that sense? Then evil did not need creating. If so, our search for the source of evil will take us in another direction.

"Augustine observed that evil could not be chosen because there is no evil *thing* to choose."

Augustine approached the problem from a different angle. He asked: Do we have any convincing evidence that a good God exists? If independent evidence leads us to conclude that God exists and is good, then He would be incapable of creating evil. Something else, then, must be its source.

If Augustine's approach is fair, it prompts a pair of syllogisms that lead to a different conclusion. First: (1) All things that God created are good; (2) evil is not good; (3) therefore, evil was not created by God. Second: (1) God created everything; (2) God did not create evil; (3) therefore, evil is not a thing.

The key to success here, is the truthfulness of two premises. **If Augustine can offer evidence through natural theology that God exists as Creator and also that God is good, making everything He created also good, then the conclusion—evil is not a thing—automatically follows.**

This is Augustine's strategy. If evil is not a *thing*, then the case against Christianity stated in the original syllogism is unsound, because one of its premises is false. The critical question is: *What is evil?*

Digging a Hole in Goodness

Central to Augustine's idea of goodness (and, consequently, evil) was the notion of *being*. To Augustine, anything that had *being* was good. God, as the ground (or root) of being, was perfectly good, along with everything He brought into being. This goodness was a property of said being that came in varying degrees.

With this foundation Augustine was now prepared to answer the key issue: "Where is evil then, and whence, and how crept it in hither? What is its root, and what its seed? Or hath it no being?"^[1] To this Augustine answered: "Evil has no positive nature; but the loss of good has received the name 'evil.'"^[2]

Augustine observed that evil always injures, and such injury is a deprivation of good. If there were no deprivation, there would be no injury. Since all things were made with goodness, evil must be the deprivation of goodness: "All which is corrupted is deprived of good."^[3] The diminution of the property of goodness is what's called evil. Good has substantial being; evil does not. It is like a moral hole, a nothingness that results when goodness is removed. Just as a shadow is no more than a "hole" in light, evil is a hole in goodness.

To say that something is evil, then, is a shorthand way of saying it either lacks goodness, or is a lower order of goodness than what ought to have been.

But the question remains: "Whence and how crept it in hither?" Augustine observed that evil could

not be chosen because there is no evil *thing* to choose. One can only *turn away from the good*, that is from a greater good to a lesser good (in Augustine's hierarchy) since all things are good. "For when the will abandons what is above itself, and turns to what is lower, it becomes evil—not because that is evil to which it turns, but because the turning itself is wicked."^[4]

Evil, then, is the *act* itself of choosing the lesser good. To Augustine the source of evil is in the free will of persons: "And I strained to perceive what I now heard, that free-will was the cause of our doing ill."^[5] Evil was a "perversion of the will, turned aside from...God" to lesser things.^[6]

Flawed Perfection

Augustine's solution has not been satisfying to some. Friedrich Schleiermacher snorted at the concept that God gave good creatures the freedom to do bad. If a being is perfect in its goodness, he held, it would never sin even if it were free to. Evil would then have to create itself *ex nihilo*, which is ridiculous.^[7]

However, it doesn't follow that moral perfection necessarily entails immutability. That's a different type of perfection, a perfection in being. Schleiermacher's objection confuses the two. The fact that a perfectly beautiful vase is capable of being broken doesn't take away from its aesthetic perfections. In the same way, it makes sense to say that man was created morally perfect (morally whole or complete, at his proper level of goodness), even though he wasn't immutable in this perfection.

The objections raised by atheist philosophers J.L. Mackie and Antony Flew are more substantial.^[8] Isn't it possible that God could have created man immutable in his goodness, yet still have the opportunity to

freely choose in other areas? Won't man have immutable goodness in Heaven? And will he not also have freedom to choose among certain options? Why not here on Earth? Couldn't God construct man's nature such that evil simply was not an option? Mackie and Flew are right in one regard. God could have created such a world. Freedom in the larger sense (the ability to



make choices) does not require freedom in the narrow sense (the ability to make *moral* choices).

They miss the big picture, though: God would not have accomplished a second purpose. He not only wanted free creatures; He also wanted plenitude, that is, the greatest good possible. Plenitude—the highest good, the best of all possible worlds—requires more than just general freedom; it requires moral freedom, and that necessarily entails the possibility of evil. Since all that God made is good, even those things which appear evil only appear that way because of a limited context or perspective. When viewed as a whole, that which appears to be evil ultimately contributes to the greater good.

For example, certain virtues couldn't exist without evil: courage, mercy, forgiveness, patience, the giving of comfort, heroism, perseverance, faithfulness, self-control, long-suffering, submission, and obedience, to name a few. These are not virtues in the abstract, but elements of character that can only be had by moral souls. Just as evil is a result of acts of will, so is virtue. Acts of moral choice accomplish both.

The Best of All Worlds

A world that had never been touched by evil would be a good place, but it wouldn't be the best place possible. The best of all worlds would be a place where evil facilitated the development of virtues that are only able to exist where evil flourishes for a time. This would produce a world populated by souls that were refined by overcoming evil with good. The evil is momentary; the good that results is eternal.

What good comes out of a drive-by killing, someone might ask; or the death of a teenager through overdose; or a daughter's rape; or child abuse? The answer is that a commensurate good doesn't always come out of those *individual* situations, though God is certainly capable of redeeming any tragedy. Rather, the greater good results from having a world in which there is moral freedom, and moral freedom makes moral tragedies like these possible.

A Heavenly Twist

"Bearing up under evil in this life improves our resurrection in the next."

This observation reveals an interesting twist in this problem. If morality *freely chosen* can only happen in a world where evil is possible, then heaven will be a place where there will be no moral growth, where moral choices will not be possible because all the inhabitants of heaven will be immutably good. There is a type of soulish growth only available to inhabitants of a fallen world.

Two Scriptural observations lend credibility to this view. First, in recounting the great heroes of faith, the writer of Hebrews mentions that some were *rescued* by faith, but others *endured* by faith "...in order that they might obtain a better resurrection."^[9] (Hebrews 11:35) Second, Paul tells Timothy that "...godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come." (1 Timothy 4:8)

Both of these verses indicate that conditions in this life affect conditions in the next. Bearing up under evil in this life improves our resurrection in the next. Godliness in this life brings profit in the next. These benefits are not available after this life or there would be little urgency to grow now; all eternity would be left in which to catch up. It appears that a deeper, more profound good results when virtue is won by free, moral souls struggling with evil, rather than simply

granted to them as an element of their constitution.

Spoiled Goodness

Augustine knew that evil was real. Independent evidence (natural theology) was enough to convince him that God existed and that everything He created would be good. Evil, then, must be something real, but not a "thing" in the conventional sense. Evil is not a created thing, but spoiled goodness made possible by the free moral agency of rational creatures. Evil is not something present, but something missing, a deprivation.

The challenge that God could have created a world of free-will creatures immutable in their goodness is answered by the notion of plenitude, the greatest good. The possibility of evil also makes a greater good possible. God made a world in which true moral decision-making and development of virtues is possible in humans, manifest by persons whose character is formed through growth and struggle.

There's a sound reason why God has allowed evil. It doesn't conflict with His goodness. God is neither the author of evil, nor its helpless victim. Rather, precisely because of His goodness He chooses to co-exist with evil *for a time*. The prophesy of its end has already been given.

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- [2] Augustine, *The City of God*, XI, CHAP. 9.
- [3] Augustine, *Confessions*, VII: [XII] 18.
- [4] Augustine, *City of God*, XII, CHAP. 6.
- [5] Augustine, *Confessions* VII: [III] 5.
- [6] *Ibid.*, [XVI] 22.
- [7] *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 3, 138.
- [8] See J.L. Mackie, "God and Omnipotence," *Mind*, April 1955, and Antony Flew, "Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom," *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, 1955 (referenced in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 3, 138).
- [9] Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible*.

When Love Lets Us Suffer

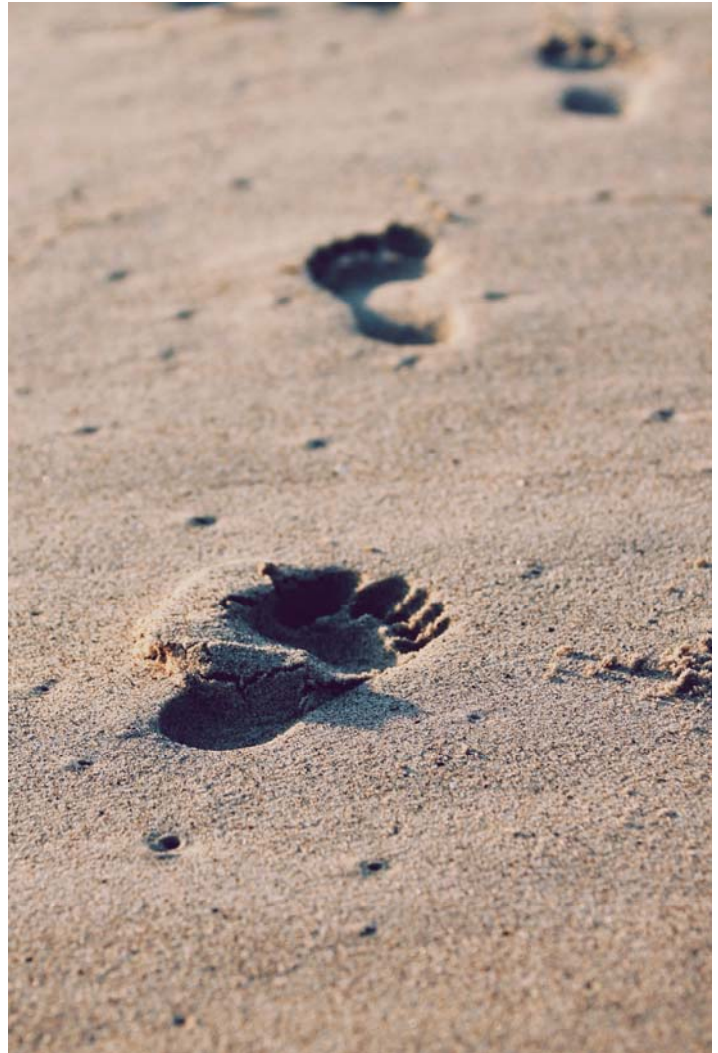
By Dave Jenkins

We often think that if God loves us, He should spare us, or those we love, from suffering. And when He doesn't, we wonder how that can be love. In John's account of Lazarus's death and resurrection, Jesus shows us how this can be.

We start by being bewildered at Jesus' responses to Lazarus's plight. First, after hearing of his friend's illness, Jesus waited two days before going to see him. In fact, we are told that Jesus loved Lazarus, and *therefore* he delayed the visit for two days (John 11:5-6). *Therefore?* That's a strange way to show love. Then, after Lazarus died, Jesus said, "I am glad that I was not there" (v.15). Jesus was glad that he let his beloved friend die? That's a strange way to show love.

And here is where many people in pain misunderstand God and rail against what looks to them like God's indifference to, or maybe sadistic enjoyment in, their anguish. Even those who knew Jesus best and loved Him most—His disciples, Martha, and Mary—were confused and deeply disappointed at first.

So why did Jesus delay, and why was He glad? It wasn't indifference to Lazarus's agony or gladness over his death. No, these things actually moved Him to tears (John 11:35). Jesus delayed and rejoiced because of what he knew God was going to do for Lazarus and everyone else who would ever believe in Jesus—through Lazarus's suffering and death.



Martha and Mary were not wrong to long for their brother's healing or to grieve when it didn't come. Disease and death are evils. But what God planned to do through this terrible event was beyond anything they could imagine. Through Lazarus's death, God would show His glory (v.40) and reveal His Son's power over death (v.25). Furthermore, the events surrounding Lazarus's death would actually hasten Jesus' own death (vv. 46-53), purchasing eternal deliverance from death for Mary and Martha and Lazarus and all the rest of us!

In other words, by letting Lazarus die, Jesus loved Martha, Mary, Lazarus, and millions of others in the most profound way he could. It's just that it didn't look that way at first.

That's how it is in our suffering, too. When we ask God to take away our agony, and He delays, we wonder how that can be love. With Lazarus, Jesus pulled back the curtain to let us see. God withholds a joy we request only if He plans to give us, and many others, far greater joys.

Sovereignty, Suffering, and the Work of Missions

By M. David Sills



If God is sovereign and all powerful, He must not be good. Or if He is good, then He must not be sovereign and all powerful. So reason many who believe that there should simply not be any suffering in the world. But even if they understand some suffering in the world, surely an all-powerful and good God would not allow any difficulty to come into the lives of those who are serving Him and His people. Those who reason in this manner are dumb-struck when missionar-

ies suffer setbacks, sickness, or sorrow—paying the ultimate sacrifice through martyrdom is completely inexplicable to them. They sometimes conclude that there is no God, or the One who exists must be powerless to stop evil, or that He is indeed powerful, but is evil Himself, and therefore does not wish to stop it. Our sovereign, all-powerful, omnibenevolent God has used suffering to advance His cause and bring glory to Himself throughout history and around the world. The history of missions is filled with stories of those who suffered for His name to advance the kingdom. Charles Spurgeon wrote, “The best apologists for Christianity in the early days were its martyrs. The anvil breaks a host of hammers by quietly bearing their blows.”

God’s sovereignty is clearly seen in the calling, guiding, and sustaining of missionaries in their work on the field. There is no other reasonable explanation why men

and women with higher education, successful careers, meaningful ministries, and extended families would leave everything to go to live in difficult settings, exposing both themselves and their children to tropical diseases and dangers they would not know in the land of their comfort zone. But a right understanding of the call to missions assumes the very real possibility of suffering. When Adoniram Judson was asking for the hand of his future wife, he wrote to her father:

I have now to ask, whether you can consent to part with your daughter early next spring, to see her no more in this world; whether you can consent to her departure, and her subjection to the hardships and sufferings of a missionary life; whether you can consent to her exposure to the dangers of the ocean; to the fatal influence of the southern climate of India; to every kind of want and distress; to degradation, insult, persecution, and perhaps a violent death. Can you consent to all this, for the sake of him who left his heavenly home, and died for her and for you; for the sake of perishing, immortal souls, for the sake of Zion, and the glory of God? Can you consent to all this, in hope of soon meeting your daughter in the world of glory, with the crown of righteousness, brightened with the acclamations of praise which shall redound to her Savior from heathens saved, through her means, from eternal woe and despair?

Jim Elliot often spoke of the dangers he knew he would face as a missionary in Ecuador's eastern jungles. After watching a death there, he wrote in his journal, "And so it will come to me one day, I kept thinking. I wonder if that little phrase I used to use in preaching was something of a prophecy: 'Are you willing to lie in some native hut to die of a disease American doctors never heard of?'"

"The Bible teaches that God has a plan for your life, and it may be very far removed from any plans you have developed on your own..."

Given that suffering is so much of the missionary's life, we have to wonder why any sane person would leave the comforts of home to embrace it. I don't think he would, any more than anyone would think of leaving a successful business to pastor a local church as a savvy career move. The call of God on the lives of men and women creates an inner sense of the "shoulds and oughts" and a fire shut up in their bones. Only a sovereign God could so stir men and women to walk away from homes, families, careers, and lifelong dreams to embrace what may very well be a life of suffering; it's not a choice one makes in a vacuum.

The Bible teaches that God has a plan for your life, and it may be very far removed from any plans you have developed on your own (Psalm 139:16; Ephesians 1:11). The Bible records God's calling of Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Jonah, and Paul to a life they would never have imagined—or chosen. In more modern contexts we often hear missionaries recounting their call to a life that is counter-intuitive at first, but perfectly understandable in response to His call.

Star athlete, Ed McCully, who won the 1949 National Hearst Oratorical Contest and was unanimously elected to be senior class president at Wheaton, had been accepted into Marquette University Law School. He was working as a hotel night clerk to while in law school. God called him to Ecuador through his study of Nehemiah during a night shift at the hotel the night before he was to begin his second year. He left all he had planned to follow God's unmistakable call, knowing it would require sacrifice and self-denial. Ed was martyred in the Ecuadorian jungle on January 8, 1956, along with Jim Elliot and three other friends.

Jim Elliot was a fervent missions mobilizer, known for passionate preaching to persuade peo-

ple to missions. “Our young men are going into the professional fields because they don’t ‘feel called’ to the mission field. We don’t need a call; we need a kick in the pants.” Yet, even this fervent young preacher understood the importance of hearing God’s call before stepping into such a life. He had been recruiting his friend, Pete Fleming, to join him as half of an initial two-man team in Ecuador. Pete hesitated before committing and Jim realized he might have been pushing too hard. He then wisely cautioned him in a letter to consider the challenges and be sure of a missionary call before launching out:

I have no word for you re: Ecuador. I would certainly be glad if God persuaded you to go with me. But He must persuade you. How shall they preach except they be sent? If the Harvest-Chief does not move you, I hope you remain at home. There are too many walls to leap over not to be fully persuaded of God’s will.

We clearly see God’s sovereignty in the Scriptures and throughout the pages of history in the calling of men and women as well as guiding them to the places where He would have them to serve. Syrian Antioch was the first truly intercultural, international, missions-minded church. It was also a church of believers that were so committed to following Christ—even after the suffering and martyrdom that drove them there—that they were first called Christians there. It should be no surprise that it was to that church that the Holy Spirit said to set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work of missions. They sent their best teachers to the places He was calling them.

God calls each of us to serve Him, and He guides us to the places He wants us to be. In Acts 16, the Holy Spirit redirects Paul and his mission team to the place where He would have them go. He guides His people today in many ways as seen in His calling of young men to youth ministry, guiding youth ministers to transition to associate pastor roles, then to be senior pastors, and later to serve Him in some capacity in their retirement. In the same way that He guides pastors from one church to another throughout their ministry career, He stirs, calls, and guides missionaries. Sometimes missionaries move to serve the Lord in other places or in other capacities when He redirects them.

Our sovereign God not only calls and guides, He also sustains those He leads through all the years, tears, and fears of their missionary careers. Would that we had time and space to review the sufferings of missionaries such as William Carey, Adoniram Judson, David Livingstone, C.T. Studd, and Jim Elliot, along with God’s sovereign sustaining. Those familiar with their stories know that God’s sovereign plan for them included suffering.

“When His children suffer, it is not cosmic child abuse, it is loving us just as we are, but also loving us too much to leave us that way.”

In contemporary adoption practice, the adopting parents give a child full rights of inheritance and familial equality with their natural children. Even though the adopted children may have no resemblance to anyone in the family physically, they are accepted and embraced as fully as the other children. The Bible teaches us that when God saves us, He not only adopts us into His family, He then begins to conform us to His image. Suffering is often the tool that God uses to shape and fashion us. He knows precisely what we need to conform us to the image of Christ. (Romans 8:28-30; 12:2; Philippians 3:10; 1st & 2nd Peter) When His children suffer, it is not cosmic child abuse, it is loving us just as we are, but also loving us too much to leave us that way; He uses whatever He knows that we need to begin to take on the family likeness of our Elder Brother.

The Bible teaches us to rejoice in suffering, (Romans 5:3-4; Acts 5:41), and presents plenty of

our biblical heroes surviving and even thriving in and through suffering, such as Job, David, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The Scriptures speak of the suffering of righteous people, teaching that it is for their good and His glory. (Psalms 22; 73; Luke 12:12-19; 13:2-4; Romans 8:33-39)

Even though the world argues that it cannot possibly be for our good, we recognize God's sovereignty in our suffering—even to the point of martyrdom—and to do so, we need look no farther than the Lord Jesus Himself. Beyond His example of suffering for our salvation, we see in the Bible the good that resulted from the sufferings of others such as Stephen and Paul. The Christian life we have been called to live would be hard to understand and impossible to recognize without suffering. Paul told Timothy, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (2nd Timothy 3:12) All the martyrs of church history demonstrated the truth of Tertullian's declaration, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

Throughout Christian history, it has been God's sovereign plan to expand His kingdom through suffering. Indeed, there is such a close connection between suffering and success, trials and triumph, and pain and praise, that we should not seek to avoid suffering at all costs or keep it hidden when it happens.

Suffering advances the Kingdom in ways inexplicable to modern man. The persecution and martyrdoms of missionaries during the Boxer rebellion, including that of missionaries John and Betty Stam, were followed by significant advance of Christianity in China. Totalitarian regimes and countless tragic martyrdoms have not extinguished the church, but rather resulted in its growth. After the martyrdom of Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Pete Fleming, Roger Youderian, and Ed McCully in Ecuador, news media spread the news around the world. The number of those who volunteered to go to mission fields to take their place is estimated in the thousands, and they came from all over the world to go all over the world. In subsequent years, when the widows would tell their stories and noted the results of so many people surrendering to missions, some remarked that it was obvious why God allowed the men to suffer and die.

Yet, the widows wisely responded that although God had clearly used the events for good, they cautioned against concluding God's reasons. Elisabeth Elliot said that we may not know until we get to heaven why God allowed the martyrdom, and we have no guarantee that we will be told even then. It is our place to trust our sovereign, all-powerful, all-good God in the meantime. Whatever success or suffering attends their work, missionaries recognize that it is all for our good and His glory, and all He wants is all they want.

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- iv. Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty: The Life & Testament of Jim Elliot* (San Francisco: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 150.
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Four Ways Why Being God-Centered Matters in the Lives of His People

By Dave Jenkins



The Bible from beginning to end is the story of God.

There is but one living and true God (Deuteronomy 6:4), an infinite, all-knowing Spirit (John 4:24), perfect in all His attributes, one in essence, eternally existing in three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14)—each equally deserving worship and obedience. To be God-centered is to know and experience the God of the Bible in the daily practice of our lives.

You and I live a world that is saturated with idols. From hobbies to entertainment, to workaholism to pornography and materialism, we are inundated with “gods” all around us. To be God-centered is to have a biblical view of God. Sound doctrine must be matched in our lives by sound living. When we have right doctrine, but don’t practice that doctrine, we may be able to answer people’s questions, but we will never do so in a loving Christ-honoring way. Doctrine not only transforms but should adorn our lives. In this article, I want to look at four ways that being God-centered matters and how it changes our lives (Titus 2:10).

The Gospel

God is the Gospel, John Piper has written. Our view of God has consequences (both good and bad). For example, people who grow up in broken and dysfunctional homes often have a view of God the

Father as one of a harsh or angry god. They place their experience of their earthly father on God who is called Father. Instead of viewing God as the Creator of everything and as good, loving, and just—they instead consider Him as harsh, punishing, and demanding.

The gospel flips this perspective upside down and inside out. As Creator, God is the Father of all men (Ephesians 4:6), but He is Spiritual Father only to Christians (Romans 8:14; 2 Corinthians 6:18). He has decreed for His own glory all things that shall come to pass (Ephesians 1:11). He continually upholds, directs, and governs all creatures and events (1 Chronicles 29:11). In His sovereignty, He is neither the author nor approver of sin (Habakkuk 1:13) nor does He abridge the accountability of moral, intelligent creatures (1 Peter 1:17). He has graciously chosen from eternity past those whom He would have as His own (Ephesians 1:4-6). He saves from sin all those who come to Him, and He becomes, upon adoption, Father to His own (John 1:12; Romans 8:15).

“Every true Christian should long to engage in regular reading of the Word of God...”

Prayer

Understanding who God is helps His people to have a healthy God-honoring prayer life. Since Jesus has died in our place, for our sin, and risen again—He now serves High Priest and Intercessor over His people. Hebrews 4:16 invites God’s people, through Christ, to come boldly before His throne. Sometimes Christians think they have to clean themselves up before they can come to God. Yes, we must confess and repent of our sin (1 John 1:9), but we do so only because we have a right understanding and fear of Him (Proverbs 1:9; 9:10). Without a biblical fear of God, we would never desire God, grow in Christ, or long to pray to Him. When we understand God and that His ways are just, holy, and good, we will earnestly desire to come before the throne of God’s grace, knowing that He receives us warmly because of Christ, not because of our works.

Bible Reading

Every true Christian should long to engage in the regular reading of the Word of God. Whether in audio or printed format, the Bible has never been more available than it is today in the history of man. Since the Bible is God’s story, His love letter to His people, and it is the inspired, inerrant, sufficient, and authoritative for faith and practice—His people should read His story in the Bible. After all, our story finds its completion in His redemptive story.

When we read the Bible, we do so not so we can say, “I read my Bible today.” Instead, Christians read the Bible because it is God’s story to help them know who God is and how through Christ, He gave of Himself completely for His people in His death and resurrection.

As God’s people, we read the Bible, not out of duty, but rather out of delight. It is a delight to read the story of God from the beginning of the Bible in Genesis 1:1 to the last words in Revelation 22:21. We need to read or listen to our Bible’s each day to grow in our understanding of our God.

Community

God has called people, who were once not His people, to be His people in and through Christ (1 Peter 2:9-10). God has always had people whom He has called His own. Through Christ, He no longer calls them His enemies, but His friends (John 15:15). All who place their faith in Jesus Christ are immediately placed by the Holy Spirit into one united spiritual body, the Church (1 Corinthians 12:12, 13), the Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:23-32; Revelation 19:7, 8), of which Christ is the Head (Colossians

1:18). The Church is thus a unique spiritual organism designed by Christ, made up of all born-again believers (Ephesians 2:11 – 3:6).

Final Thoughts

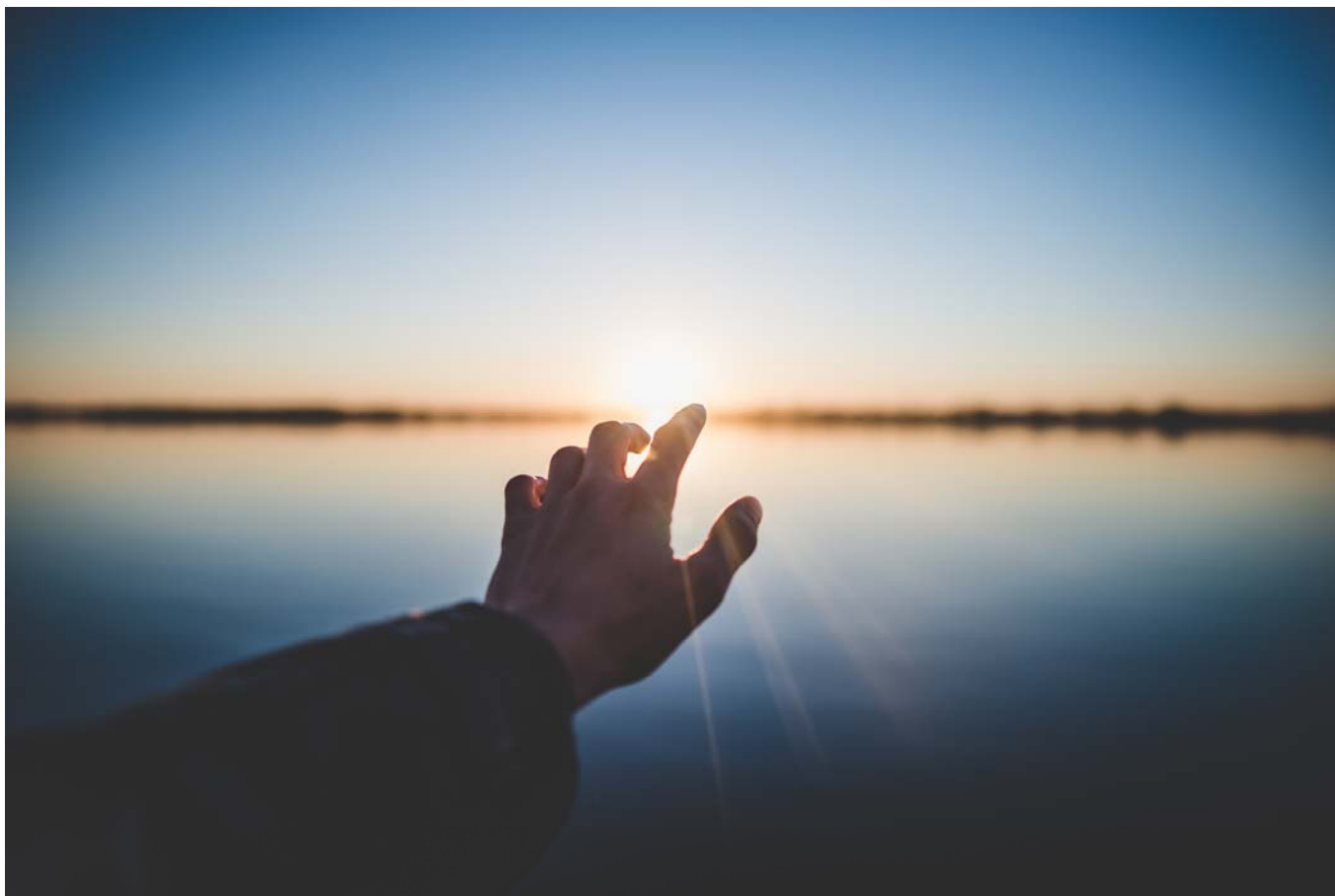
There is much more that has, can, and will be said in the coming days about the God-centered nature of the Christian life. To be God-centered is to be focused on Him, to be all for Him, not just in word, but in deed. To be God-centered is to have our lives revolve around not only the question, “Who is God?” but also, “Why does having God in my daily life matter?”

Our God is a treasure to be enjoyed, worshiped, and obeyed. Our God does not leave us dead and stranded. Instead, our God is active and has intervened in history through Christ to redeem man from the death penalty they justly deserve by dying in place of man and for their sin and rising again on the third day.

Whether it’s from the angle of the gospel, prayer, Bible-reading, community, or any other perspective that we might consider—our God is good, just, loving, merciful, kind, and holy. God is the Gospel. Through understanding this critical truth, His people are enabled to have hope and access to the Fount in Christ Jesus, our Lord, Master, and Commander. To be God-centered is to increasingly have our theology match our daily experience as we walk day by day, week by week, and year by year with God in Christ.

Hope: The Best of Things

By Joey Tomlinson



Hope has been defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “desire with anticipation.” Other definitions given by Merriam-Webster include a “deeply held wish” or a “feeling of wanting something to happen.” I’m certain that this is how the broader culture defines hope, but is there more to it?

From a Biblical worldview, we must ask ourselves the questions, “What is Christian hope?” and “How is it different from a wish or wishful thinking?” In order to do that our minds and feelings must be informed by the Scriptures. I’d like to draw your attention to a passage that you may not think of when thinking through this word, *hope*. In Romans 15:8-13, the Apostle Paul takes us by the hand and says:

For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, “Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.” And again it is said, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.” And again, “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him.” And again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.” May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

In this passage, the Apostle Paul quotes from three different sections of the Old Testament and his audience would have picked up on this instantly. He quotes from the *Law* in verse 10, which can be found in Deuteronomy 32:43. He quotes from the *Prophets* in verse 12, and this can be found in Isaiah 11:10. And finally he quotes from the *Writings* in verses 9 and 11, which can be found in Psalm 18:49 and Psalm 117:1.

Why is this important when seeking to grapple with Christian hope? God made a promise in the Old Testament for the newly depraved Adam and Eve and consequently their children (including us). He promised in Genesis 3:15:

“I [God] will put enmity between you [serpent] and the woman [Eve], and between your offspring and her offspring: he [the coming Messiah] shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

Every covenant promise in the Old Testament pointed to the promise of this coming Messiah. Every covenant in the Old Testament revealed more and more the glories of this majestic promise. Could you imagine the anticipation for this promised to be fulfilled in the Old Testament? Could you imagine the urgent hopeful desire to see this promise fulfilled?

Now, in our text here in Romans we have the Apostle Paul saying that God is truthful. God is a promise keeper. Paul says that Christ (whom he mentions in verse 8) is the One that the entirety of the Old Testament (Law, Prophets, and Writings) prophesied about. After all these years, the long-awaited Messiah has come! Therefore, you can be hopeful. This is force behind verse 13: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”

So, why do we have hope according to our text in Romans? Because Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah. Therefore, biblical hope is rooted in God being faithful to His promises and we can look to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to be reassured of this. Christian hope then isn’t wishful thinking? There is certainty in the hope of a believer. There is a God-centered confidence. We don’t hope with our fingers crossed. We hope knowing that God keeps His promises and we only need to look backwards to the cross to be reminded.

There is another reason Christians can hope differently than the world hopes. That is because

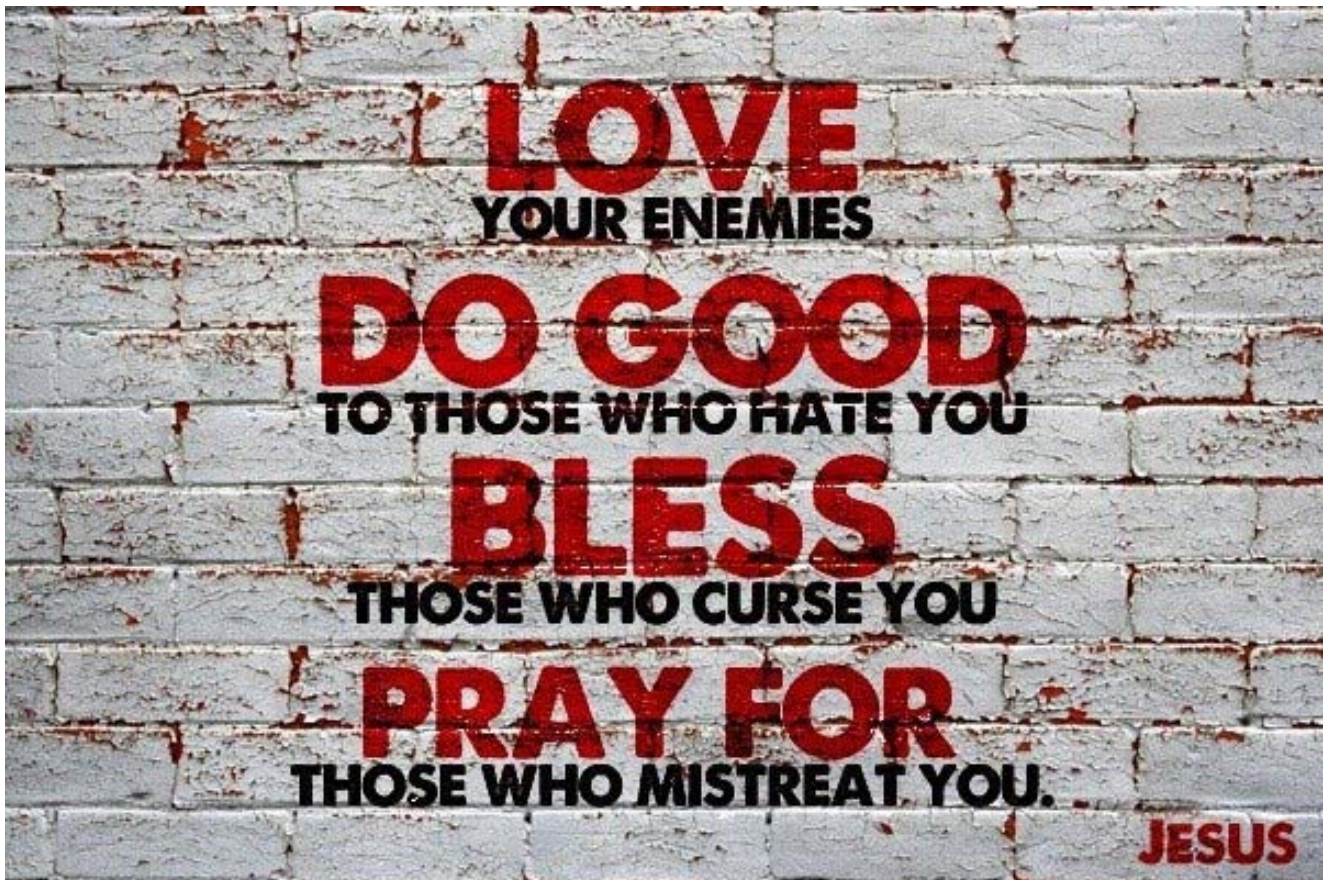
as Christians, the Holy Spirit lives in us. Consider Paul's words in Ephesians 1:13-14:

"In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory."

When we trust in Christ Jesus and repent of our sin, God seals us with His promised Holy Spirit who is the "guarantee of our inheritance". This isn't wishful hope. Our inheritance is so certain it is as if it has already happened. We can look forward to the "city that is to come" (Hebrews 13:14) with a sure hope. So the next time you hear the word *hope*, think back to these two passages of Scripture and be assured that Christian hope is grounded in the unshakeable foundation of God Himself (Hebrews 12:28-29).

ISIS: Loving Our Neighbors and the Judgement of God

By Dave Jenkins



Few issues are as volatile right now as the problem of ISIS. Former President Obama, during his Presidency, stated multiple times that Islam is a “religion of peace”. While some denominations of Islam may seek to have peace, the statement that Islam is itself unequivocally a religion of peace is a historical inaccuracy. Mohammed was a mass-murderer who slayed, not only his own people, but also anyone who got in his path that did not conform to his ideology. The pure form of

Islam isn't peaceful; it's always been violent. Any religion that views others as opponents to be dominated is not a religion that's peaceful—it's a religion of war. Islam desires war and to make everyone submit to what they believe. Now, I realize that's not what you hear on TV every day, but it is a historical fact.

While Islam continues to be presented as a religion of peace—contrary to historical fact—the truth of the matter is they are not the only (or even the first) people to commit terrorist's acts against God's people. There was one person in particular that heavily persecuted the early Church. That man was Saul, who later became the Apostle Paul. Terrorists are nothing compared to the sovereign power of God. God can transform a terrorist and turn him into a bondservant of the Lord Jesus Christ. He did this with Saul when He turned him into the Apostle Paul, a man who set the ancient Mediterranean world on fire for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christians have been called to love God as well as their neighbors (Matthew 22:37-40). God's people have been called to love our enemies, and to do good to those who persecute us (Matthew 5:43-48). Is it "wrong" for a Christian to pray specifically with regards to how they feel? Regardless, if one is comfortable or not praying the imprecatory Psalms, or whether they become a core of our prayers, such an approach should remind Christians that the world is full of injustice and God is just. With this understanding, the Christian can leave the wrongs that others have delivered to them in the hands of a Sovereign God.

Too often today the love of God has been highlighted apart from the holiness and justice of God. The imprecatory Psalms highlight the anger or wrath of God. Furthermore, the Old Testament is replete with examples of God's justice. Once a year on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would enter into the Holy of Holies to offer atonement for the people of Israel. Before the high priest went into the Holy of Holies, the other priests tied a rope around his ankle so if any of the prescriptions and regulations the Lord had established had been violated, the priests could pull out the high priest's dead body.

"The supreme command for the Christian is to love God and his/her neighbor..."

The imprecatory Psalms are part of Scripture. God is holy and loving. The God of the Bible is a God of justice who demands retribution to be paid for man violating His law, commands, and statutes. The imprecatory Psalms reveal a God of justice. With that in mind, the reader of these Psalms needs to know the rest of God's attributes, along with the fact that the God of the Bible is not primarily interested in smiting people and sending them to Hell.

When the totality of Scripture is examined, the God of the Bible emerges as a God who is loving, just, and holy. His holiness demands that He deal with sin. His love compels Him to pardon sinners who come to Him in faith. While the imprecatory Psalms highlight a crucial aspect of the attributes of God, the reader also needs to know the story line of the Bible which focuses on the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

Matthew 5:43-48 is clear that we are to love our enemies. The supreme command for the Christian is to love God and his/her neighbor (Matthew 22:37-40). Jesus in Luke 6:27 declares, "But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." Christians can pray the imprecatory prayers, but they cannot act on what they are praying. For example, someone could

pray, “I feel this way about this person God [insert how they feel here about this person, people group, etc.]”, but they are not allowed to act on those feelings on their own accord. I would also counsel people not to tell someone that you’ve prayed for them in such a way. The Christian can pray the imprecatory prayers with the understanding that ultimately what they are desiring is God’s sovereignty to reign in that situation. Our goal as Christians should be to love God and one another. With that said the Christian is to “feel” how they feel, but they must express those feelings primarily towards God with a focus on His will to be done on earth.

One weakness of the diary approach to the imprecatory Psalms is that it doesn’t take these Scriptures seriously. Imprecatory prayers are more than just a “diary approach”, where people share their feelings. Instead, they reveal a God of justice. While the imprecatory Psalms passionately express how the Psalmist(s) felt, they are also part of the Scriptures. As part of the Scriptures, they reveal an essential aspect of God’s character, namely His holiness and justice. Undergirding the imprecatory Psalms is the idea that vengeance belongs to the Lord. The Lord will mete out His justice in His time and according to His sovereign purpose. As such, while the Christian may/should pray imprecatory prayers, they also need to trust the sovereignty of God. When all of this is considered, we come to understand now that He alone will execute His justice on the wicked in His own timing for His own glory.

God's Grace and Your Suffering

By David Steele



Achilles was the Greek hero in Homer's Iliad during the Trojan War

who was killed by Paris with an arrow that struck his only vulnerable spot, his heel. So the Achilles heel is the vulnerable or susceptible spot. Critics of historic Christianity often point to the problem of evil and argue that it is the "weak spot" of our faith. Hence, the problem of evil is referred to as the Achilles heel of the Christian faith.

Ronald Nash writes, "Objections to theism come and go...But every philosopher I know believes that the most

serious challenges to theism was, is, and will continue to be the problem of evil." Clearly, then, the problem of evil must be reckoned with and responded to in a way which is faithful to Scripture. Ignoring this thorny problem is unhelpful and only fuels the fire of the unbelieving world.

How shall we respond to the problem of evil? How shall we respond to the problem of pain? How shall we respond to the problem of suffering? D.A. Carson admonishes Christians, "It is important to try to establish Christian structure of thought that are already 'given' before pain and bereavement strike." Let us turn, then, to the apostle Paul to see how he handled the pain and suffering that came cascading into his life.

Paul's Pain

The apostle Paul was no stranger to pain. In his letter to the Corinthians, he recounts the intense suffering that he endured:

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness,

danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches (2 Corinthians 11:24–28).

In Philippians 2:27–30, he describes how he battled sorrow and anxiety. And in 2nd Timothy 4:10 the Apostle laments the departure of Demas, who betrayed him.

The Portrait of Pain

2nd Corinthians 12:7 describes Paul's pain: "So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited." The Greek term which is translated thorn is a "wooden stake or splinter". Scholars have long debated the exact nature of Paul's thorn. Some people believe the thorn involved temptation. Others maintain this entailed a physical problem such as epilepsy or migraine headaches, or even a speech disability.

John MacArthur's explanation appears to be the most plausible as he explains the Greek phrase, *aggelos satanā*, translated as "messenger of Satan". MacArthur maintains that "it is possible that a demonized person was one of the ringleaders of the so-called Corinthians conspiracy and may have been the leader or the false apostles." In this case, Paul would have been ridiculed, mocked and tormented by this "messenger of Satan". His reputation and credibility would have been called into question by this emissary of the evil one.

No matter what the "thorn" involved, we know from the context that it was deeply troubling to Paul; so much so that it led to an intense and prolonged season of prayer for deliverance. He did not want the "thorn" in his life (v. 8). Paul provides another clue concerning the nature of the thorn in verse 10. This thorn led to "weakness, insults, hardship, persecutions, and calamities."

Are you familiar with the "thorn"? It comes in many shapes and sizes and may strike at any time. It could be a time of physical testing. It could involve persecution or the loss of a loved one. It could involve character assassination or the staging of a coup in your ministry or business. Whatever your "thorn" involves, it is never easy and usually entails pain and suffering of some kind.

The Purpose of Pain

The purpose of pain has to do with the revelation that Paul received and describes in verses 1–6. Specifically, the purpose of the thorn is to keep Paul from becoming conceited. The Greek word, translated conceited means "to exalt oneself or become haughty." When God's people become proud, haughty, or conceited, they become unfit vessels for God's purposes (James 4:6–10; Isa. 66:2b).

Additionally, the purpose of the thorn is to harass the apostle. *Harass* means "to strike with the fist or cause difficulty." The same word, translated *harass* is used in Matthew 26:67a: "Then they spit in this face and *struck* (*kolafidzei*) him."

The Providence behind Pain

There is a fundamental reality we must come to grips with if we have any hopes of weathering the painful storms of life. Please understand that God ordains everything that comes into our lives, both the good and the bad. The Westminster Confession of Faith helps immensely at this point:

God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things comes to pass immutably and infallibly, yet, by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second cause, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.

The “thorn” from Satan is the secondary cause. A few examples may help further define the importance of distinguishing a so-called secondary cause. Who was the secondary cause of the evil in Joseph’s life? Answer: His brothers. Who was the secondary cause of the evil that came crashing into Habakkuk’s life? Answer: The Chaldean army. Who was the secondary cause of all the evil which was hoisted upon the Jews during the holocaust? Answer: The Third Reich.

Moreover, we must understand that in an ultimate sense, the thorn comes from the hand of God. That is, divine permission is given directly from God. Indeed, he is the “first cause” (Job 1:6-12). Job 42:11b bears this out: “And they showed him (Job) sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him.”

Yet, we understand that while God sovereignly ordains all things, He is never responsible for sin. He is praiseworthy for ordaining the events in our lives. The people who carry out acts of evil are blameworthy or accountable for the heinous and sinful acts they commit.

Paul’s Response to Pain: Prayer

Notice Paul’s request: “Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away” (2 Corinthians 12:8, TLT). Paul’s request was passionate; his request was persistent. The apostle is not the first person to make a passionate appeal to God:

- *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest” (Psalm 22:1–2).*
 - *“Do not forsake me, O Lord! O my God, be not far from me! Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!” (Psalm 38:21–22).*
 - *“For my sighing comes instead of my bread, and my groanings are poured out like water. For the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me. I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest, but trouble comes.” (Job 3:24–26).*
- “Two important aspects of Paul’s perspective help us to maintain our bearings when we endure a season of suffering...”

God’s response to this Paul’s passionate appeal is not only instructive but gives us a glimpse into His heart. Paul recounts what God said to him: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2nd Corinthians 12:9a).

God finds great delight in dispensing grace to weak people, especially people who have been burdened by the sting of suffering. Grace (Greek: *châris*) is God’s loving-kindness and favor. It is His merciful kindness by which He exerts His holy influence on people, turning them to Christ, keeping them, strengthening them, and increasing them in the Christian faith.

The Scripture tells us that He is the God of all grace (1 Peter 5:10). He is the giver of grace (Psalm 84:11). He invites His people to the throne of grace (Hebrew 4:16). His grace is immeasurable and is expressed through Christ (Ephesians 2:7). His grace is glorious (Ephesians 1:6). And this grace that He takes such delight in dispensing to His people is sovereign (Romans 5:21).

God's grace is sufficient for weak people. Sufficient means "to be possessed with unfailing strength; to be satisfied or contented with." It carries the idea that God's grace is enough. And God's power shines brightest in weak people. That is, God's power is "made perfect in weakness."

Perspective

Two important aspects of Paul's perspective help us maintain our bearings when we endure a season of suffering. First, pay close attention to his rally cry: "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2nd Corinthians 12:9b).

The rally cry of Paul leads us to a God-centeredness that we should emulate during times of both pain and prosperity. Paul's only boast is in the cross (Galatians 6:14; 1st Corinthians 1:31). The reason for his "boast" is clearly marked out in verse 9: "so that the power of Christ may rest in me."

But don't miss his resolution: "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2nd Corinthians 12:10). The man who endured a season of bitter Providence and suffering was not only content in Christ; he was transformed into a strong man. This suffering saint defied conventional logic. Instead of being defeated by suffering, his life was revolutionized and he stood strong by God's grace and for God's glory.

Final Considerations...

Every Christ-follower must wrestle with the problem of evil. On one hand, we must refuse to minimize the severity of suffering. C.S. Lewis faced the problem of evil with realism and a clear-headed resolve. Speaking of the pain that every human being inevitably faces, he made this lament: "If I knew a way of escape I would crawl through the sewers to escape pain." Such is the attitude of a person who is open and honest about the pain in his life.

On the other hand, we must regard suffering as a tool that God sovereignly uses to strengthen us for his purposes. Paul's suffering led to a deeper reliance on Christ, as we have seen. D.A. Carson remarks, "This is, at the end of the day, the ultimate test of our knowledge of God. Is it robust enough that, when faced with excruciating adversity, it may prompt us to last out with hard questions, but will never permit us to turn away from God?" We too, are called to this kind of faith-filled response to God, especially during days of pain and suffering. The Puritan, Richard Baxter, once said, "Suffering so unbolts the door of the heart, that the Word hath easier entrance." Oh, that suffering would drive us to the Word and on our knees to worship our great God. May Paul serve as a model and inspiration when we face suffering and may we have the same rally cry and resolution—***"For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong"*** (2nd Corinthians 12:10) .

Putting to Death the Fear of Man in the Light of God's Glory

By Dave Jenkins



“So Jesus said to them, “The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.” When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them. Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” Therefore they could not be-

lieve. For again Isaiah said, “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.” Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him. Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God” (John 12:35-43).

It was a dark night in Jerusalem. At least it was dark in the Prophet Isaiah's heart, for the King had died. King Uzziah had ruled Judah for 52 years; a time characterized mostly by godliness and divine blessing. But now Uzziah was dead, and Isaiah entered the temple seeking light for the darkness of his grief and dismay. What happened that night would determine the course of Isaiah's life. Isaiah 6:1 tells us, “In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple.”

As John the Apostle draws down the curtain on the ministry of Jesus before the Cross, he thinks of Isaiah. For, through the mystery of the inspiration of Scripture, John had come to realize that in Isaiah's vision of the Lord, the 8th century B.C. Prophet had seen the Lord Jesus. John 12:41 states, “Isaiah said these things because he saw His glory and spoke of Him.” The long-ago experience of Isaiah, a pivotal moment in the Old Testament, was focused on what would later happen to the Messiah. For, like Isaiah, Jesus spoke of light to the world in darkness and of darkness that would seek to

put out that light.

The Offer of Light

John 12:35-36 records the final public appeal of Jesus to God's ancient people Israel. John 12:36 explains, "He departed and hid himself from them," and He would not be seen publicly until His trial and crucifixion. The final words of any great man are important, but the last public teaching of Jesus is especially significant. It forms a summary of His entire message as presented to John. John 12:35 says, "So Jesus said to them, 'The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going.'"

From the beginning of his Gospel, John has used light to describe Jesus. Light is an ancient symbol for God, and by applying it to Himself, Jesus declared His deity. Psalm 27:1 declares, "The Lord is my light and my salvation." Jesus' claim to be a light shining in the world teaches us that He is the One who makes God known. It is by following Christ's light that those in the darkness are led to God.

Jesus warns that His light will soon be taken away. "The light is among you for a little while longer." This made it urgent for anyone who would be saved to believe on Him. John 12:35 exclaims, "Walk while you have the light lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going." This is Jesus' warning: the Pharisees and other Jews who were opposing Him did not realize what they were bringing onto themselves.

To reject the light is to be plunged into a greater darkness. The Pharisees were themselves the greatest examples of this principle. It is clear that in the last phase of Jesus' ministry, the Pharisees no longer seriously doubted the truth of His claims. They knew that He had given sight to the man born blind and raised dead Lazarus from the grave. But still, they rejected the light of Christ, preferring the petty darkness in which they exalted themselves. The result was that darkness overtook them and they became far more hardened to God in the end than we could have imagined at the beginning. This presents a challenge to those today who have heard and understood the gospel, but who have not yet committed themselves to Jesus in saving faith. Their encounter with the rejected Jesus will not leave them with a little light but rather with a much deeper darkness.

John 12:36, which records Jesus' final public statement, is both wonderful and dreadful at the same time. It is wonderful because Jesus' last words consist of an invitation to His light. "While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light." It says much about Jesus' heart that He wanted His final words not to drip with the acid of condemnation but to flow with the sweet offer of God's grace.

His departure would take the light from the world, so He leaves behind the gospel offer to become children of God by believing in His light. But even so, the aftermath of Jesus' gospel offer is dreadful. John 12:36 says, "While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light. When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them." The time comes for unbelievers when the gospel is no longer available to believe. This time might come with death, but it could also come when their hearts have come so hardened through practiced unbelief that they are no longer able to believe. Jesus "hid himself from them". When we realize that Jesus is the only true light the only Savior for a world lost in sin, His withdrawal from those who will not believe portends their final condemnation in eternal darkness.

The Tragedy of Darkness

Jesus' last pleas to the Jews were straightforward. But their refusal to believe raises questions. If these Jews who alone in their world knew the Holy Scriptures and lived in God's holy city, would not believe in Jesus then what hope is there for anyone else? Another question deals with God. If God has gone to such pains to send his only Son to offer salvation to the world, only to be so broadly rejected, does this not suggest that God has somehow failed.

Such questions are on John's mind, so he adds a postscript to Jesus' final sermon. John 12:37 explains, "Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him." This refers to Jesus' miracles especially the great miracles of healing the man born blind and raising Lazarus. Even after this, the bottom line was the unbelief of the Jews.

What does it take to win peoples' belief, if even this didn't work among the Jews? To answer these questions, John turns back to the prophet Isaiah. Jesus' earlier remarks in chapter 12 refer to Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 53, and John returns to that passage. The Jews did not believe; he explains so John 12:38 says, "So that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?'"

Jesus had referred to this question from Isaiah 53 in explaining that he would be "lifted up" and "exalted" (Isaiah 52:13). John points out that the same passage included Isaiah's lament that this message would be rejected. Isaiah 53:1 questions, "Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?"

This is the travesty that Jesus experienced, with both His message and His miracles rejected by almost everyone. John's point is that the same Old Testament prophecy that foretells the cross also foretells the rejection of Jesus' message. The Jews of Jesus' day did not believe in Him "so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled." This raises some questions because it seems to say that the reason the Pharisees and other Jews rejected Jesus was that an earlier prophecy had foreordained it. This also suggests that God had predestined the Jews' unbelief.

Many writers recoil against such a suggestion, lest God be thought to compel people to sin. William Barclay objects, "It seems to say that God has ordained that certain people must not and will not believe. Now in whatever way we are going to explain this passage, we cannot believe that. We cannot believe that the God whom Jesus told us about would make it impossible for His children to believe."

Barclay suggests that we read John not to say that the Jews did not believe "so that" Isaiah's prophecy would be fulfilled, but rather "with the result that" the prophecy was fulfilled. The unbelief of the Jews was the kind of thing that Isaiah was complaining about rather than something that Isaiah was specifying prophesying. Some stalwart Reformed commentators take the same view, including F.F. Bruce, J.C. Ryle, James Montgomery Boice, and A.W. Pink. The problem with this view is what John says (John 12:39), "Therefore they could not believe."

In some meaningful sense it must be that, in light of Isaiah's seven-hundred-year-prophecy, the Pharisees were not able to believe in Jesus. Their unbelief did not defeat God's purpose; rather it achieved God's purpose. John 12:39-40 states, "Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, 'He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.'" There is no way to avoid the fact that here it is God who is acting to blind and harden the people and that he does so for a reason: lest they

should see, understand and turn “and I would heal them”. Isaiah 6:9-10 says, “And he said, “Go, and say to this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.””

Isaiah had seen the vision of the Lord’s glory and offered his services to God. God responded by commissioning him to a preaching ministry that was designed to harden the hearts, close the ears, and blind the eyes of Israel. By explaining the unbelief to the Jews toward Jesus with this passage, John is relating Jesus’ unbelieving generation to the earlier generation of idolatry and unbelief to which God sent Isaiah to preach judgment. Now, as before, it was God’s sovereign purpose that this judgment would consist in the hardening of the people against the gospel offer of peace.

There are three ways in which we should understand God’s hardening of the Jews. First, we

should realize that the Jews’ rejection of Jesus was part of God’s sovereign plan for our salvation. God purposed for the Jews to reject Jesus so that He might be crucified for our sins. This rejection involved both the will of the unbelieving Jews and the will of God. As Peter later preached in Acts 2:23, “This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” Peter accuses his hearers of their culpable guilt and also ascribes what happened to God’s sovereign plan.

“Do we object to this? If we do, we are objecting to the very plan of God that achieved redemption through the crucifixion of Jesus.”

Do we object to this? If we do, we are objecting to the very plan of God that achieved redemption through the crucifixion of Jesus. Moreover, the Jews’ rejection of the gospel brought salvation to the Gentiles, which includes most Christians today. If we object to God’s will in hardening Jesus’ Jewish hearers, we object to God’s plan for our salvation. We would do better to follow Isaiah’s example when he accepted God’s commission for his ministry of hardening: Isaiah had seen the Lord’s sovereign majesty and knew better than to pit his puny wisdom against the Lord’s holy will.

Second, John’s teaching reminds us that the gospel is a “two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12; Rev. 1:16), giving eternal life to those who believe, but conveying judgment to those who are hardened in unbelief. This is why Jesus warned in John 12:35, “Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you.” Gordon Keddie explains, “Those unwilling to believe become progressively unable to believe.” And Leon Morris writes, “They have rejected the gracious invitation of God, and it is God, none less, who has decreed that those who act in this way have their eyes blinded and their hearts hardened.”

Third, it is clear in this passage that the hardening effect of unbelief is not merely a natural cause and effect but God’s judicial response. J.C. Ryle comments, “God has given over the Jews to judicial blindness, as a punishment for their long-continued and obstinate rejection of His warnings.” This presents us with a sober reality since God has not changed over the years. People think they can wait to commit themselves to Jesus. They want a few more years to enjoy their sins, and they think that at the time of their choosing they can become Christians and start living as they know they should. But they do not realize the hardening effect of unbelief on their hearts; that it will be increasingly difficult for them to believe.

They might come to a time when it is impossible for them to believe. Moreover, since God is offended by their disdain for His Son, it is entirely possible for God to give such people over to ultimate reprobation. The time came when God gave over the Jews to a judicial hardening, so that John

says in John 12:39, “Therefore they could not believe.” This explains that when God presents you with the invitation of His gospel—the gracious offer to forgive your sins and grant you eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ—that is the time when you should believe, accepting the gospel in trusting faith.

The same goes for professing believers who gain some benefit from Christianity, but who have never actually reckoned with God and surrendered their lives to Him. The longer you wait, the greater risk you take. While unbelief has the effect of hardening our hearts to the gospel, faith works in the opposite way. When our eyes accept the truth revealed in Scripture, our spiritual perceptiveness increases. When we sorrow over our sin and seek grace to repent, our hearts are made more tender and pure. When our ears are frequently attuned to the Word of God, they become sharper in hearing His voice. Through such saving faith, we turn to God and are healed. Our sins are washed away by the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ. Just as the blind man of John 9 received his sight and Lazarus was brought from death to life, our souls are restored by God’s grace until in the end we will be fully healed of every vestige of sin and corruption. All of this shows the eternal significance of how we respond to the gospel whenever it is proclaimed and offered.

2 Corinthians 6:2 states, “For he says ‘In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.’ Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” To put off belief in Christ is to reject Him. Jesus calls you to walk in His light and offers that in this way you will receive eternal life as a child of God. When people of their own accord and after repeated threats and promises, reject Him and spurn His messages, then and not until then He hardens them so that those who were not willing to repent may not be able to repent.

The Challenge of Faith

Part of the good news of the gospel is that God is always at work in surprising ways to bring salvation to those in darkness. This was true from the gloomy setting that John has described. He concludes the passage telling us that “among the chief rulers [i.e. Pharisees and Sadducees] also many believed on him” in John 12:42. It is hard to imagine a more difficult ministry setting than that of the Pharisees and Sadducees who were seeking to put Jesus to death.

When Jesus offered them salvation one last time, even among this hostile group, there were some who began to see His light. But there was a problem with these new converts. John says that while they had believed in Jesus, “for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue.” This reminds us that there is a price to following Jesus. Jesus offers a free salvation, but it comes with the possibility of the world’s rejection. These new believers were reluctant to be cast out of Jewish society, which was what expulsion from the synagogue entailed. But Christ demands that His followers not be secret disciples; sooner rather than later, a true believer must go public with his faith in Jesus Christ; regardless of the cost.

Mark 8:38 proclaims, “For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” John tells us that these men who believed remained silent. John 12:43 says, “For they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.” This is a particular temptation to those who are high in the eye of the world. Many if not most Christians struggle with these same temptations. This is one of the reasons why we are tempted to blend in with the world in our manner of living. We fear to be ostracized if we live openly and boldly as followers of Christ. We are reluctant to speak to people about the only Savior who can redeem their souls.

Final Thoughts

What will break this spell of our fear of man and love of the world? The answer is found in the

word that appears in verses 41 and 43: *glory*. These cowardly Pharisees were afraid to admit their belief in Jesus because they were enthralled by the *glory of this world*. But in contrast, Isaiah committed himself to the Lord, “because he saw his [Jesus’] glory” John 12:41 says.

If we go back to Isaiah 6, we read that he, “...saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple.” (Isaiah 6:1). It was Jesus that He saw in a seat of ultimate sovereignty, high and majestic over every power and authority. He saw that Jesus’ robe filled the temple so that there was no room for any other sovereign in His kingdom. Isaiah also saw holy angels, the seraphim, and they were singing in rapturous praise. Isaiah 6:3-4 states, “And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory! And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.’” Isaiah saw the weightiness of Christ, the awesomeness of Christ, the holiness of Christ, and the consuming fire that burns in the heart of our Lord.

As a result Isaiah no longer feared the world or stood in thrall to its tarnished glory. He would stand against the world with Jesus and speak to the world for Jesus. If the same is not true of us, then the logical explanation is that we have not seen what Isaiah saw. We are more concerned with our lifestyle, our comfort, and with getting by in the unholy world. This is why we are more interested in practical matters and consider theology boring and irrelevant. This is why we fear the world and love its glory. This shows that our greatest need is to see the glory of Christ, as Isaiah did. J.C. Ryle comments, “The expulsive power of a new principle, making us see God, Christ, heaven, hell, judgment, eternity, as realities is the grand secret of getting the victory over the fear of man.”

Isaiah received his vision of Christ by direct revelation, as the Lord revealed His glory to the grieving prophet in the Temple. How, then, are we to see the glory of Christ? The answer is that for Christians today, the glory of Christ is found shining through the Word of God. This is what Peter emphasized in his second letter. He admitted that he had the privilege of witness miracles and seeing visible displays of Christ’s glory. 2nd Peter 1:19 says, “And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”

This is what the two disciples discovered on the Emmaus road. Jesus appeared to them on the day of His resurrection, yet His chief display of glory was in explaining the Bible. Luke 24:32, “They said to each other, ‘Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?’” The Lord has given to His Word the power to convey the glory of Christ to our souls. When the Bible becomes that for us the revelation of divine glory to our faith then we will no longer have to worry about the danger of our hearts’ becoming blackened, we will cease to fear what man might do, and the spell of worldly glory will be broken. For Christ will be high and exalted on the throne of our hearts and the train of His robe will fill the temple of our souls.

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Suffering, Adversity, and Character Development

By Greg Koukl

Whatever difficulties you face, it's safe to say there is something else going on than what meets the eye.

In what way is God working all things for good? According to Romans 8:28, God is conforming us to the image of His Son. Jesus Himself was brought to maturity through suffering. Hebrews 2:10 says, "For it was fitting for God, for Whom and through Whom are

all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the Author of their salvation through sufferings."

The author of salvation is Jesus. He was brought to His proper fullness and maturity through suffering. This was the way Jesus lived, so this is the way that followers of Jesus will live. This is one of the most profound lessons I have been confronted with as a follower of Christ. I hesitate to say I've learned the lesson because I don't know if the lesson is ever fully learned.

It is a lesson that we are confronted with time and time again: spiritual growth comes principally through hardship. I'm not saying that the Christian life is always miserable. I'm saying that the means by which God gets our attention and changes us is often through difficulty, hardship, and suffering, which is demonstrated throughout the New Testament. That's why I'm mystified as to how



folks like those in the so-called Word Faith movement believe that God wants us healthy, wealthy, and prosperous at all times.

Persevering under suffering and difficulty is the theme for the believer in 1st Peter. This book talks about Jesus as our example: suffering unjustly, not speaking out, not complaining, and trusting His soul to a faithful Creator in doing what is right. I was talking about this concept with a friend of mine who's going through some very difficult things. Sometimes we can accept persecution as part of being a Christian. Some adversities, like marital strife or problems with children, are harder to accept. They are things that seize us as they come upon us. We didn't deserve it, we didn't cause it, but there it is.

"I'm offering this reflection as an encouragement to those who are feeling the weight. You're crying out, wondering what could be worse?"

On the one hand, there is the practical side of deciding how to solve the issue. On the other hand, there is something God is doing that is unrelated to the conflict itself. The conflict is the tool that God is using to do something else in the life of the Christian. Lewis captures this notion wonderfully in a number of places in the Chronicles of Narnia series. In *The Horse and His Boy*, Aslan reveals to this boy, who has gone through hardships of all sorts through his life, that the hardships have been orchestrated by Aslan to accomplish a particular goal. The goal is good and noble, yet not obvious in the midst of the hardships.

Whatever difficulties you face, it's safe to say there is something else going on than what meets the eye. There is something that God is intending to accomplish within us that is something other than the nature of the conflict itself. When you are in a difficult trial and the pressure becomes almost unbearable, you may cry out to God, and it may seem that the circumstances get worse. The pressure increases and you cry out because you think you can't take it. You start to wonder what the point is and where the good is. Some of you know exactly what I'm talking about. It's as if you're under this weight, and the weight is being piled on more and more. You're crying out and then something happens.

The thing that happens is not that the weight gets removed. Rather, something deep inside of you moves. The pressure is so immense that it causes something to shift. The thing that God wants to shift is so calcified, solidified, and resistant to movement that it takes an unbelievable amount of pressure. I can think of a specific occasion in my own life in which this occurred. Afterwards, I felt a significant shift had taken place. Deep down inside of me, something changed, and it was so deep and significant that it was a forever kind of change. The world looked different to me after that. If that shift hadn't taken place, I don't think I'd be doing what I do at Stand to Reason today.

I'm offering this reflection as an encouragement to those who are feeling the weight. You're crying out, wondering what could be worse? What could happen next? Things may get worse and pressure may increase, but stay the course. Just stay the course, for we know that God causes all things to work together for good for those who love Him who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He pre-destined to become conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:28-29).

The Problem of Evil in the Book of Job

By Dave Jenkins



The Lord is sovereign, powerful, and good. Evil exists and creatures bear moral responsibility for it. In making sense of the undeniable presence of sin, along with injustice and suffering it causes, many people deny one or more of these essential truths. People postulate that God is not truly in charge of the world and rendered finite by sin. They also may think that He is somehow limited in His ability to effect change in the world, or perhaps He is both good and evil (a strange mixture of both). Some even try to deny the reality of evil, rendering it an illusion or a matter of perception. Still others deny responsibility for their sinfulness, shifting the blame to other people or a bad environment.

The word *theodicy* comes from the Greek *Theos* ("God") and the root *dik* ("just"), and seeks to

justify the ways of God to man, showing how God is on the right and is glorious and worthy of praise, despite contrary appearances. Christian philosophers and theologians have explored several approaches to the problem of theodicy. Christian philosopher, C. Stephen Evans says that two of the more important Theodicies are the “soul-making theodicy”, which argues that God allows evil to make it possible for humans to develop certain desirable virtues. The “free will theodicy” explains how God had to allow for the possibility of evil if He wished to give humans (and angelic beings) free will. Theodicies are often distinguished from defenses, which argue that it is reasonable to believe that God has reasons for allowing evil even if we do not know what those reasons are.

Certain forms of theodicy speculations vary widely. Some teach a false universalism, whereby everyone will be saved in the end. Others say that one will retain his/her freedom in sin, even in his/her resurrected heavenly state, which leaves open the possibility of sin occurring *again* in the eternal state. Dr. Packer notes, “Some Calvinists envisage God permissively decreeing sin for the purpose of self-display in justly saving some from their sin and justly damning others for and in their sin. But none of this is biblically certain. The safest way in theodicy is to leave God’s permission of sin and moral evil as a mystery, and to reason from the good achieved in redemption.”

Regarding the coexistence of God and sin, it is important to note that humility is needed because one can only see and know in part, and because God has secrets He has chosen not to reveal to man. A study of the Bible declares that God is always perfectly and solely sovereign, powerful, and good. It is entirely clear from Scripture that God is angry because of sin and evil, and that creatures—not the Creator—are responsible for it. Sin never destroys the plan of the Lord, never limits His power to act, and never stops Him from doing good in the midst of the worst evil. From the appearance of Satan in the Garden onward, sin and evil are not dealt with systematically, but in such a way as to compel the Christian to continued faith in God—trusting in His ultimate providence that one day the presence and power of sin will be no more. To assume that God cannot (making Him not sovereign or not powerful) or will not (making Him not good) is to judge God before He judges evil, rendering the verdict prematurely. Since people are in the middle of history, until God is done with all of His work, one must not judge Him, but rather trust Him until He is finished with sin and history as we know it.

Evil is never outside the providential control of the Lord. The Lord is at work doing His good purposes in the context of evil. The story of Joseph is an example of this in the final dozen chapters of Genesis. In Genesis, we read of Joseph’s betrayal at the hands of his brothers, his unjust suffering, and his eventual rise to power because the Lord was with him, whereby many lives were saved. When Joseph confronted his brothers, the providence of God was at work in his life, as Genesis 50:20 teaches, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today.” A descendant of Joseph named Jesus Christ suffered similarly. Jesus was betrayed by his brothers, suffering the worst injustice in history when He was hung and died in shame on a Roman cross. At that moment, it would have been tempting to ponder if God was not sovereign and had lost, or if He was good, perfectly, just, and powerful enough to stop injustice. Three days later, Jesus rose from His grave, aton-

“Jesus was betrayed by his brothers, suffering the worst injustice in history when He was hung and died in shame on a Roman cross.”

ing for mankind's sins, and was fully vindicated as sovereign, good, and powerful.

God used the freely chosen evil of Judas, Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles, and Jews to accomplish His perfect purpose in the same way He used the Chaldeans—an evil nation—to punish the persistent sin of Judah and Jerusalem. This does not mean that their evil is His responsibility. In a cosmic way, the God of all providence uses evil to judge evil. Even as His hand brings punishment to Israel and death to Jesus, He also brings redemption and resurrection into the context of judgment and death.

A day is coming when Christians will also rise to Jesus. On that Day, our faith will be sight, and we will see God fully vindicated, as we enter the best possible world after passing through this world which prepares us for it. Until that Day, our answer to the question of how God's sovereignty relates to sin is ultimately a prayerful, worshipful, humble, and continual meditation on Romans 8:28, which promises, "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

Dr. Albert Mohler, the President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said, "The problem of evil and suffering is undoubtedly the greatest theological challenge we face." Since the problem of evil is the greatest theological challenge Christians face today, we will explore the meaning of theodicy in the Book of Job, Christian theology, and also aim to help readers to form a Christian response to the problem of evil.

Theodicy and the Book of Job

The question Job faces is this: "Will Job serve the Lord for nothing when evil comes upon Him?" Job is never told why he is suffering or going through what he is—even by the Lord when He speaks to Job. Ultimately, the Book of Job and the Old Testament wisdom books simply call one to

"The Book of Job is a commentary on the complicated issue of suffering."

submit to the Lord humbly. Job is not finally given an answer to the problem of evil, nor is his question of why everything is happening to him ultimately answered. What is answered, however, is the fact that God has His purposes for His children who are experiencing suffering. The reason suffering exists is because we live in a post-Genesis 3 world, where the creation is cursed and people are under bondage to sin.

The Book of Job does not give an answer concerning the question of the problem of evil, but it does call Christians to humbly trust in the Lord. Whether in the midst of pain, suffering or agony, the Lord will sustain His people through it all for His purposes and glory. Job was humbled by the Lord when He revealed Himself to Job in chapter 42:5-6. Like Moses and Isaiah, it was God's visible glory that humbled Job (Job 42:5-6).

Job did receive a reply, not the answer to the question of, "Why is this happening to me", but an answer as to *who*: God! Job didn't get an answer as to *why* he was suffering, since the Lord never told him about the test. But Job did receive confirmation of his assumption that suffering is not always for sin (despite his friends' beliefs on this issue). This is evidenced by Job's vindication by the restoration of his blessings in chapter 42:12-17. The Lord revealed His omnipotence as Creator in contrast to Job's finite understanding and powerlessness as a created being. The Lord revealed His infinite knowledge in contrast to Job's limited human perspective.

The Book of Job is a commentary on the complicated issue of suffering. While there may be many Theodicies found within its pages, it seems to have far more to say about how the problem of

evil and suffering is dealt with than it does about the problem itself. To be sure, one can inspect Job's example and conclude that justice prevailed in the end. God not only made restitution to Job, but Job found himself more abundantly blessed than he had been *before* his suffering. Likewise, we can demonstrate how Job's affliction served as a discipline and worked to transform him into an even more righteous man. In other words, pain (in this situation) led to greater good. Even the well-reasoned explanation of his suffering would have been wholly insufficient to Job amid his agony as the concrete problem of evil demands more than an abstract, philosophical answer. For this reason, in spite of the counsel of his three "friends", Job cries out to God himself for a suitable explanation (Job 31:35).

In fact, the Book of Job perhaps serves more as a critique of theodicy than a source of theodicy. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar defended God's justice, often with very logical arguments and rational reasoning, and yet, God said of them in the end, "you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (42:7 ESV). How can it be that the one with no answer to his suffering is commended, while those with the best theodicies are under wrath? Let's now turn to consider the arguments of Job's three friends.

Eliphaz, the first to speak, offers a straight-forward hypothesis: "Who that was innocent ever perished?" (Job 4:7). Because Job is suffering, Eliphaz suggests he must have sinned; thus Job himself is responsible for his own pain. This argument treats suffering as punishment and blames human free will (as opposed to God) for evil; it would likely have resonated well with a Hebrew audience. However, not only does Eliphaz oversimplify the problem, but he becomes increasingly arrogant in arguing. He begins gently and obliquely—only indirectly referring to Job—but by his third speech, he does not hesitate to hurl insults and directly accusing him of sins. Moreover, Eliphaz implies that he is somehow a prophet who has heard God's voice and now speaks on His behalf (Job 15:8, 22:22). Therefore, while Eliphaz offers what may seem like a decent theodicy, his ignorance is evident by the end of the book, and even worse, he does nothing to comfort his friend in need.

Bildad also offers a theodicy: "Does God pervert justice?" (Job 8:3). His argument is very pragmatic, insisting that if Job repents, God will restore his fortune; he even uses examples of history to demonstrate his point (Job 8:8-19). However, as Job maintains his integrity, Bildad's language intensifies. Certainly the idea that suffering may serve as a "wake up call" is valid; even Jesus uses examples of suffering to call people to repentance (Luke 13:1-5). However, Bildad commits a logical fallacy by assuming that this is necessarily the case with Job, which reveals the limits of his theodicy.

Zophar does not offer nearly as complicated an argument as the first two friends; in fact, one might wonder whether or not he gives any argument at all! Instead, he merely asserts himself (rather arrogantly, at that) and expects Job to change his mind. Like the others, he assumes that Job has sinned and thus is quick to clear God of any wrongdoing. With that said, he is perhaps the least compassionate of the three friends, verbally assaulting Job and even refusing to speak when his third opportunity arises. Therefore, whether he has offered an adequate theodicy or not is irrelevant; he is among the "miserable comforters" (Job 16:2) who completely fail to listen to Job.

Certainly, the arguments of the three friends were flawed; assuming Job had sinned, his suffering is problematic. After all, if suffering always indicates sin, what might one say about Jesus? Perhaps the inclusion of Job in the Hebrew canon was to caution against this type of thinking. But is the Book of Job critiquing only these three failed theodicies? Or could it be that it demonstrates the limitations and weaknesses of theodicies in general?

The Lord's answer to Job out of the whirlwind could be called auto-theodicy. "Who is this that

darkens counsel,” he asks, “by words without knowledge?” (38:2 ESV). As God begins to question Job, He reveals Job’s ignorance and limitations of understanding: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” (Job 38:4 ESV). In fact, the entirety of God’s answer to Job is designed to emphasize man’s utter weakness and inability to comprehend the things of God.

At the end of the day, Job recognizes that he lacks the wisdom to make sense of his suffering, but finds comfort in how the Lord’s ways are above his own understanding. If we use this lens, to examine the earlier speeches of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, it becomes evident why the Lord accuses them of speaking falsely—they boast of knowledge and understanding, but they do not truly know. Furthermore, they hide behind their arguments as a means of avoiding the actual responsibility of a friend: comforting the one who suffers.

Surely, the Lord’s speech to Job could be used to construct a theodicy based on the sovereignty of God; the clay has no right to question its potter, one might remark (Romans 9:20-21). It would be foolish to take this argument and use it to escape the command to “weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15 ESV). It was the three friends’ obsession with theodicy that rendered them “miserable comforters” to Job (16:2). This tendency to reduce evil and suffering to a purely rational problem—especially a problem to which one claims to possess the solution—is precisely that which the Book of Job criticizes.

Suffering As a Test of Fidelity

Job 1:8-12, 21 and 2:10 teach that suffering is a test of fidelity. Satan questions Job’s motives for religious devotion: “Does Job fear God for nothing?” (verse 9). It is not the Accuser, but the Lord who initiates the testing of Job, for the Lord says: “Have you considered my servant Job? There is none on earth like him” (Job 1:8). God’s statement that Job is his servant implies more than mere servitude; it means God and Job are in a covenant relationship based on solemn oaths.

As in Genesis 3, God set the stage and allows man to be put to the test. Here the Lord sees fit to use secondary means to accomplish His purpose. That purpose is not just to test Job as an end in itself, but to give Job the opportunity to honor his Lord to whom he has pledged his allegiance with a solemn oath. That devotion becomes a significant part of the cosmic struggle between Job’s adversary and the Lord. Dr. Elmer Smick, Professor of Old Testament Language and Literature at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, commenting on the purpose of Job says, “Understanding this struggle is basic to understanding the basic to understanding the Book of Job as well as the whole historical-religious drama of the Bible” (Genesis 3:15; Romans 16:20).

The Accuser insinuates that Job’s allegiance is hypocritical (Job 1:9). If only God would remove the protective hedge He has placed about Job (v.10), this “devout” servant would curse God to his face. The attack is on God through Job, and the only way the Accuser can be proven false is through Job. Satan is given limited but gradually increased access to Job—first to his possessions, then to his family, and finally to his physical well-being. Through it all though the primary purpose of Job’s suffering was that he should stand before men and angels as a trophy of the saving might of God, an exhibit of that divine wisdom which is the archetype, source, and foundation of true human wisdom.

The Lord’s question in Job 1:8 is in the form of a four-line poem. He speaks about Job with affection and pride. In praising Job, the Lord repeats what has been said in Job 1:1. Righteous men are rare. It may be hard to find a few (Genesis 18:22-33) or even one (Jeremiah 5:1) in a city. But it is possible; and when the Lord observes a good man, he is delighted (Isaiah 42:1).

Cynicism is the essence of the satanic. Satan believes nothing to be genuinely good—neither

Job in his disingenuous piety, nor God in His disingenuous generosity. Faith in God's goodness is the heart of love, hope, and joy and all other radiant things: cynicism is studied disbelief, and a mind turned in upon its malice is the final horror of the diabolical. Satan asks his sneering question in Job 1:9-10, "Does Job fear God for nought?" Satan knows enough about religious people to be persuaded that they are in it for what they can get out of it. This is undoubtedly sometimes right. But "worldly cares and the false glamour of wealth and all kinds of evil desire" (Mark 4:19, NEB) soon deflect such people from God. Satan knows how hurtful a taunt it is to remind God of such disappointments. Satan's argument is clever in that he argues that Job's godliness is artificial. Job's faith has never been proved by testing, and this makes God no better. The Lord has made it easy in Satan's view for Job to be good. The Lord has secured Job's devotion by "bribery" and shielded him from harm. The repeated thought in Job 1:10 is an accusation. The hedge is a protective fence (Hosea 2:6), but it could also imply that Job has been hemmed into an insufficient experience of life.

The questions of the Book of Job have now been raised and considered. God's character and Job's are both slighted by Satan. Is God so good that He can be loved for Himself, not just for His gifts? Can a man hold onto God when there are no benefits attached? Satan suggests a test to prove his point. Satan's language is abrupt; he commands God to test Job. This is further evidence that Satan does not belong to the circle of God's servants. The Lord accepts the challenge. Satan is given permission to do what he likes with all Job's property, with the exception of not touching his person. Satan goes out, eager to get on with his mischief.

Job's exclamation in Job 1:21 is the noblest expression to be found anywhere of a man's joyful acceptance of the will of God as his only good. A man may stand before God stripped of everything that life has given him, and still lack nothing. His essential being came into life naked from his mother's body, and in that second birth into another word which is death, he will pass in similar nakedness.

Job only sees the hand of God in these events. It never occurs to him to curse the desert brigands, to curse the frontier guards, to curse his own servants, now lying dead for their watchlessness. All second causes vanish. It was the Lord who gave; it was the Lord who removed; and in the Lord alone must the explanation of these strange happenings be sought.

Whatever is behind his wife's words Job rejects them with fury in Job

2:10. He does not call her wicked, merely foolish—that is, lacking in discernment. Job's wife thinks God has mistreated Job and deserved a curse. Job finds nothing wrong with what has happened to him. At this point, Job's trial enters a new phase, the most trying of all. Instead of helping, the words of his wife and his friends cause him more pain and put him under more pressure than all the other things that have happened to him so far. He has never cursed God, but all his human relationships are broken. His attitude is the same as before (Job 12:1). It is equally right for God to give gifts and to retrieve them (round one); it is equally right for God to send good or evil (round two). *Receive* is a good active word, implying cooperation with Providence, not mere submission. Such positive faith is the magic stone that transmutes all to gold; for when the bad, as well as the good, is received at the hand of God, every experience of life becomes an occasion of blessing. The cost is high because it is easier to lower your view of God than to raise one's faith to such a height.

One watches the struggle as Job's faith is strained in every way by temptations to see the cause of his misfortune in something less than God. Satan's predictions do not come true as Job did not sin. However impious and shocking some of the statements Job makes during the dialogue may seem to us, his transgression of the conventional bounds of decorous religious talk might incur the

disapprobation of the cautiously reverent men, but the only censure they receive from God is that Job obscured the divine purpose by speaking in ignorance (Job 38:2).

Suffering As a Recompense for Sin

Job 8:2-7 teaches that suffering is a recompense for sin. The disagreement between Job and his friends becomes wider in the first speech of Bildad. He does not begin as nicely as Eliphaz, but accuses Job bluntly of being a windbag, vehement but empty (Job 8:2b). Bildad is objective and analytical in his speech about God and man. As a result, he is a neat but superficial thinker. He is a moralist, and in his simple theology everything can be explained in two types of men—the blameless (Job 1:1), and the secretly wicked (Job 8:13b). Francis Anderson, a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Archaeology, writing in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series on the Book of Job says: “Outwardly the same, God distinguishes them by prospering the one and destroying the other.” To suggest that this ever happens is to throw doubt on the justice of God, and this, according to Bildad, is what Job is doing. So Bildad asks: “Does El twist justice, or does Shadday twist right?” This bi-colon illustrates the poetic device of spreading over two parallel lines words which make up a single phrase. This is not synonymous parallelism since God’s name is ‘El Shadday’, and what He is doing is ‘genuine justice’.

Dr. David Clines, Professor of Biblical Studies at the University of Sheffield (England), commented on Job 8:2-7 says: “Bildad, like the other friends, believes firmly that suffering is punishment.” In the way, Bildad applies that belief to Job’s case he differs from the other friends. Eliphaz takes it for granted that Job is essentially a righteous man (Job 4:6), and only temporarily chastised by God (Job 5:17-18) for some imperfection inevitable in any mortal (Job 4:17). Bildad, on the other hand, leaves the matter of Job’s righteousness more in doubt when he rests the whole of his encouragement to Job upon the condition “if you are innocent and upright” (Job 4:6). Job’s continued existence is *prima facie* evidence of his innocence, and Bildad wants to offer Job hope (verses 6-7, 21-22); he is far from hostile to Job despite the reproachful opening of his speech (Job 8:2).

Job did not say what Bildad was accusing him of. Job believes in God’s justice, but he cannot see it. The Shuhite sees the dangerous implications of Job’s unanswerable questions. God’s actions match a man’s behavior, so Bildad reasons backwards. Job’s children must have sinned according to Bildad. Job had been concerned about this very point and by sacrifice had provided against even their hidden sins (Job 1:5). Bildad does not recognize the possibility of forgiveness. Nothing can come between sin and its consequences. The only alternative is to be pure and upright (Job 8:6)—on this basis Job might seek God and be rewarded.

Job’s life will thus be transformed from small beginnings to a splendid end (Job 8:7). Anderson points out, “Some commentators have found an inconsistency in the advice to make supplication (Job 8:5b), literally ‘implore favor.’ This passage does not teach a subscription to the doctrine of grace on Bildad’s part.” Dr. Derek Thomas, Associate Professor of Systematic and Practical Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, commenting on this says, “For Bildad, everything is so utterly simple and straightforward: we get what we deserve. Those who prosper in this world do so because they are righteous. Those who suffer do so because they are wicked. There appears to be no exceptions to this simple rule.” Some exceptionally evil people do well in this world. It was, as must be pointed out, something that bothered the Psalmist in Psalm 73:3, “For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.”

Suffering as Submission to the Mystery of God's Sovereignty

Job 31:35-37, 38:2-7, and 42:1-6 teach that suffering is a means for submission to the mys-

tery of God's sovereignty. Job 31:35-37 is the final challenge where Job demands a hearing with the Lord. Far from being abashed, Job is belligerent to the last, eager to have his case settled, confident of the outcome, he is capable of giving a full account of all his steps. Job's troubles began when a great wind killed his children (Job 1:19). The Lord was in that storm, and now He speaks from the tempest (Ezekiel 1:4). Job is first rebuked (but not derided) in Job 38:2-7 for speaking without knowledge.

The Bible does not consider ignorance to be either sin or the root of sin. "Darkens counsel" has become a celebrated expression, but as commonly quoted, it is applied to muddled talk that obfuscates issues. *Darkens counsel* does not refer to the inconsequential debate between Job and the rest; counsel relates to the plan of God. Since in the end, the Lord will say that Job spoke the truth about Him, it introduces a serious contradiction here if the Lord accuses Job of obscuring the divine purpose. Counsel often refers to the advice dispensed by a wise man, as such it is a good parallel to knowledge. Job is completely in the dark because he *lacks* counsel and knowledge, which the Lord will now supply for Job.

In Job 42:1-6, Job is satisfied as his vision of God has been expanded beyond all previous bounds. Job has a new appreciation of the scope and harmony of God's world, of which he is but a small part. This discovery does not make Job feel insignificant, but helps him realize that he cannot even begin to imagine what it must be like to be God. The world is beautiful and terrifying, and in it God is everywhere, seen to be powerful and wise, and more mysterious when He is known than when He is but dimly discerned. The Lord has spoken to Job, and that fact alone is marvelous beyond all wonder. Job has grown in wisdom through this process and is at once delighted and ashamed.

Job's first spontaneous outburst, so different from the reserve of his reply to the first speech is an expression of unrestrained admiration. In Job 42:2, he exclaims, "You can do everything! None of your plans can be frustrated!" In verse 3a, Job repeats the questions that the Lord had asked him in chapter 38, verse 2, and now answers it. Job admits that he spoke out of limited knowledge, speaking too confidently about things too wonderful for him to understand.

In verse 4b, Job quotes the words the Lord had spoken twice (Job 38:3; 40:7), and to which he had declined to respond at the end of the third speech. Now he answers, and his reply is positive. It has two sides, as inseparable as the sides of a coin. Job has gained knowledge of God and himself. God comes first, and fills his vision: "now my eyes sees Thee". The hope of Job 19:24-27 has found its first fulfillment. Dr. Robert Fyall, Professor of Old Testament Studies and Hebrew at St. John's College in Scotland, teaches that the phrase "now my eyes see you" leads Job to repentance, not for the many sins alleged by the friends, but for ignorance and presumptuousness.

The Debate over God's Providence in Church History

Some people believe in God, but deny the Christian understanding of God's providence. Deists believe that God created the world, but left it alone to run on its own. To them, God is not involved in the affairs of people and doesn't lovingly steer history toward a particular goal. Process theologians believe in God, but deny that He created the world or that He is omnipotent. In their view, God forever influences the world and does the best He can to bring about good and avoid evil, but is limited in what He can accomplish. Moreover, since the world has always existed and will always exist, it is not headed toward an ultimate goal.

The Christian view is distinct from both these views. It affirms that God created the world, that God is omnipotent, and that He is personally and intimately involved in the world as He omnisciently steers the entire cosmos toward a final destiny. There have been several different understand-

ings of the extent of God's control of the world. In the first few centuries of church history, theologians reacted strongly against the prevalent opinion of the time that things happened by *fate*. As a result, they emphasized human freedom and tended to believe that God did not control everything that happened.

Augustine altered this view in the late-fourth and early-fifth centuries. In reaction against a widespread view that lives are determined by either a good god or an evil god who is equal, or nearly equal, in power (Manichaeism). Augustine insisted that things occur by the will of God alone. Augustine's views have been hugely influential throughout church history. Some theologians pushed his view of providence so far that they denied human beings are free (i.e. Gottschalk of Orbais in the 9th century), but most continued to affirm freedom while also insisting that God controls all things. The theological term for this position is called compatibilism, for it insists that belief in human freedom is compatible with the belief that God controls everything.

The present debate surrounding the providence of God began in the early 16th century. The French Reformer, John Calvin, strongly emphasized Augustine's view that God controls all things, including who will and will not be saved. Shortly after Calvin died, a theologian named Jacob Arminius argued that this emphasis on divine control is incompatible with human freedom and undermines the biblical teaching that God wants everyone saved. The view of Jacob Arminius is called incompatibilism for it asserts that human freedom is not compatible with God's control. Arminius still believed that God "controls the world" in the sense that God is sure to achieve His overall objectives, but felt that God has purposely decided not to control some things so that a person's decision to believe or not believe in Christ is free. According to this view, God foreknows who will and will not believe, but does not control who will and will not believe.

The Problem of Evil

A mother drowns her five children. Mass graves are found in Iraq. A sniper lies in wait, holding a community hostage. A hurricane hits the people of the Gulf region in the United States. An oil spill happens in the Gulf Region of the United States. The deadly ocean tsunami of 2004 affects hundreds of thousands of people leaving them without a home. If God is benevolent and Almighty, how can He allow such atrocities? Does He close his eyes? Is He nowhere to be found? Are some things beyond His control? Kenneth Richard Samples serves as the Vice President of Theological and Philosophical apologetics at Reasons to Believe, a non-profit and interdenominational organization, explains the challenge of the above questions, "The greatest challenge to the truth of Christianity lies with the perennial problem of evil. The dilemma of evil raises questions about whether the Christian concept of God is even coherent. Many people cite the existence of evil and suffering as their number one reason for rejecting belief in the Christian God."

Entire books have been written on the issue of the problem of evil. As one briefly examines non-Christian viewpoints and explores the nature and purpose of evil one can develop a basic Christian response to this apologetic challenge. While the issue of evil and suffering raises difficult questions, historic Christianity supplies unique and convincing answers to them.

There is evil in the world. From World War I to the modern conflicts in the Middle East and around the world, it is simply not possible to deny that there is evil in the world. Dismissing evil as an illusion is a serious departure from reality. Evil is ugly and painful, and its resulting consequences are devastating. The fact of evil in the world and specifically in human beings raises serious questions about its relationship to the Christian vision of an infinitely loving and powerful God. Some people argue that evil and the Christian God cannot logically coexist. They suggest that the existence

of evil inevitably leads to a denial of God's existence.

Why Does God Allow Evil and Suffering?

People often ask, "Why does God allow evil and suffering?" Christians must avoid presumption concerning the causes of evil and suffering because this question remains a profound mystery. As described in the introduction of this article, attempting to explain why there is evil in a world made by a good God is called theodicy (justifying the ways of God). While much more could be said regarding this issue, three points come to bear on this challenging question that need to be highlighted.

First, God has a morally adequate—but not yet fully revealed—reason for allowing evil and suffering. The Lord assures His people that his decrees and actions are righteous and holy. The Scriptures are replete in declaring God's moral perfection and His dealings with mankind just. The patriarch Abraham says in Genesis 18:25, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" And the Psalmist proclaims in Psalm 89:14, "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne." Dr. Greg Bahnsen, considered one of the greatest apologists in church history, said, "While God has a morally justifiable reason for all he does, as the sovereign ruler of the universe the Lord seldom chooses to explain himself to his creatures."

Nor is God, in His decisions, subject to the critique of finite and imperfect human beings. Even if God were to explain in detail his ultimate purposes to human beings, there is no real reason to think that mere creatures could fully understand His majestic ways. God's excellent discussion with Job concerning the problem of evil and suffering subsequently reveals God's inscrutable wisdom and Job's limited comprehension of the Creator's purpose in creation and redemption (Job 38:1-11; Isaiah 55:8-9; Romans 11:33-36).

Secondly, God's sovereignty and glory will be displayed by His ultimate prevailing over evil. The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins with the question: "What is the chief end of man?" The answer: "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." All of God's great works (creation and redemption) are intended to display God's sovereignty and glory. However, God's final prevailing over evil and sin will all the more exhibit His splendor and dominion.

This prevailing has already begun with the life, death, and resurrection of the Divine, Messiah: Jesus Christ. God's plan to deal with evil is prepared for in creation but executed in redemption. Satan and his forces are already defeated foes with Christ's first coming as Savior (Hebrews 2:14-15), and all evil and human sin will forever be vanquished at Christ's second coming as Judge and King (Revelation 21). After these cataclysmic eschatological events, the Lord will bring forth the new creation, forever free from evil and its consequences.

Revelation 21:1-3 speaks of God's creating a new Heaven and a new Earth along with the Holy City—the New Jerusalem. At that glorious time, all sin, suffering, and sorrow will be forever eliminated. God will have eradicated the problem of evil. The Apostle John provides a prophetic glimpse of this glorious eternal age to come in the book of Revelation, when he states, "They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

Thirdly, God allows evil and suffering because of the greater good that results from it. According to Scripture, the greater good for humanity came out of the greatest acts of evil. Jesus Christ, none other than God in human flesh, came to reveal God's love to humanity. Though He is perfectly holy and blameless, He was rejected by both the religious and political authorities, falsely accused,

convicted, and subsequently beaten and executed as a common criminal. Jesus suffered the agony of Roman capital punishment—crucifixion. However, God had planned this incredible miscarriage of justice from all eternity (Acts 2:22-23). Out of this horrible incident of malice and agony came divine redemption for sinners. God brought the greatest good out of the greatest evil.

Lastly, Augustine's words explain this the best, "For the Almighty God, who, as even the heathen acknowledge, has supreme power over all things, being Himself supremely good, would never permit the existence of anything evil among his works, if He were not so omnipotent and good that He can bring good even out of evil."

God's Purposes for Evil and Suffering

While Christians should be cautious about claiming to identify God's purposes behind specific incidents of injustice and suffering, the Bible does reveal insight into how God uses evil and suffering for God. First, God may use evil and suffering to get an unbeliever's attention and ultimately to draw the person to Himself (Zechariah 13:7-9; Luke 13:1-5; John 9). Christian apologist Walter Martin used to say that some people will not look up to the Lord until they lay flat on their back. Evil and suffering can shock people out of their lives of diversion and indifference to spiritual things, and even sometimes out of their false sense of control. In this way, problems may be used by God's grace to bring a person to faith. As C.S. Lewis so eloquently put it: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Secondly, God may use the results of evil and suffering to build the moral and spiritual character of His people or to express fatherly discipline (Romans 5:3; Hebrews 10:35; 12:4-11). Courage is forged only through facing one's fears, just as steel must be refined by fire. For faith to grow, it often has to be tested by fire. God expresses more concern for His children than for their comfort. Therefore God uses evil and suffering to facilitate the believer's moral and spiritual maturity. The Apostle Paul, who endured much evil and suffering, explains the causal relationship between suffering and character, "But we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3).

A loving earthly father disciplines his children. Though unpleasant at the time, discipline is crucial to a child's growth as a responsible person. God similarly allows evil and suffering to bring about discipline in the lives of His children. As the writer of Hebrews declares, "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons" (Hebrews 12:7). The assuring guarantee for the Christian, however, is that God does not allow evil and suffering to come into a Christian's life without producing a greater good for that person. The Apostle Paul set forth that divine promise in Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." With that said, facing evil and suffering is never easy, even if a person knows that God is ultimately in control.

Final Thoughts

Three critical comforts can help Christians when confronted with evil and suffering. First, Christians can know that they never suffer alone. God is acquainted with suffering for He has suffered in Christ. Jesus came into the world as a man, suffering with human beings and for them. God Himself entered into the raw, ugly mix of evil. Of all the world's religions, only Christianity reveals the God who suffers with and for humanity! His suffering in His earthly life and relationships—and on the cross—can transform His people's experience of suffering.

Even now Jesus serves as the great High Priest interceding for believers during their trials and difficulties. Jesus is not aloof or indifferent to human anguish, for He suffered as the God-Man.

The author of Hebrews describes Christ's role as a sympathetic High Priest in Hebrews 4:14-1 which says, "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

Second, God calls His children to live a life of faith (confidence and trust) in the goodness and sovereignty of God despite the presence of evil and suffering. Scripture points to the compelling examples of Abraham, Moses, Job, and Paul. In the words of a familiar song, Christians don't know what the future holds, but they do know who holds the future. Faith is trusting in the character of God when circumstances are painful and confusing. Christians can trust God in the midst of suffering because they are aware of His character and promises. The Apostle Paul assures the Church through asking and answering a probing question, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:35, 37).

Finally, evil and suffering go beyond a logical or philosophical problem—they are deeply personal and human problems. When people face suffering, they need comfort and reassurance. Christians can and should confront evil and suffering in a powerfully practical way by comforting those afflicted by evil and by easing the suffering of the people around them.

The historic Christian answer to the problem of evil and suffering is found in the example, as well as the identity of Jesus Christ. God came in the flesh to heal His children's suffering to comfort as well as to teach, and ultimately to destroy the power of evil. The suffering of God in the finished work of Christ is the solution to the problem of evil for human beings.

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Hope When it Hurts

An Interview with Kristen Wetherell and Sarah Walton

By Dave Jenkins



Kristen Wetherell and Sarah Walton are the authors of Hope When It Hurts: Biblical Reflections to Help You Grasp God's Purpose in Your Suffering (www.TheGoodBook.com).

T4L: You each have been diagnosed with Lyme disease and continue to suffer the effects after many years. Pain and suffering is deeply personal, but is there kinship among Lyme sufferers?

Sarah and Kristen: Definitely! While we wouldn't wish Lyme disease on anyone, there's so much comfort in realizing you're not alone. Many people who suffer with this awful disease go years without a diagnosis, without an explanation for their pain. Yet even when the diagnosis comes, most people have never heard of Lyme and are left feeling isolated and overwhelmed. Meeting another person who has experienced this disease is not only a comfort, but it greatly helps you navigate the road to recovery.

T4L: How did the diagnosis, coming after years of unexplained pain, impact each of you?

Sarah: For me, it was a mixture of emotions, as I think many diagnoses are. While I was thankful to have an answer, I felt overwhelmed by the mountain in front of me. That mountain only grew bigger as we slowly learned our entire family had Lyme disease. I had passed it onto my husband and four children. If I think about it too long, the reality of our future feels crushing. So I frequently remind myself that none of us knows what tomorrow will bring, even when we feel healthy and happy. I've learned to entrust my days (and my family's), moment by moment, to the Lord's sovereign plan. If he chooses to allow suffering from this illness for the rest of our lives, I believe he has a good and loving purpose. Someday we will clearly see all the good and beautiful born out of this suffering.

C.S. Lewis says, "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Kristen: I resonate with Sarah's response. For my husband and me the diagnosis was bittersweet. We felt thankful, even glad, to finally have an answer after many years of pain. Simultaneously we felt shocked, sad, and scared. When you can't see the road ahead of you in any diagnosis, fear presses in and threatens to steal your peace. But we've found help in running to Scripture and praying together every day. One day at a time, we say, we will trust God, the doctors, and the treatment plan.

T4L: How does American culture view suffering, and how does it compare to a Christian perspective?

Sarah and Kristen: American culture often views suffering as something to be avoided at all costs. If we believe that we are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, then anything that gets in our way seems inconvenient and purely negative. Even as believers, we get caught up in this way of thinking, assuming that if God were for us, he would keep us from all harm and discomfort. After all, he is our defender, provider, and protector, right?

But God's ways are not our ways. His love for us desires something far greater than our temporary happiness and comfort. Rather, he longs for us to have the eternal joy, happiness, contentment, and peace that only he can give. And suffering is often the training ground he uses to strip away our false sense of securities and comforts in order that he can fill us with an unshakable and joy-filled hope in Christ our Savior. In a nutshell, suffering is often what God uses to deepen our understanding of the gospel and allow its truth to saturate every aspect of our lives.

C.S. Lewis says, "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures,

speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

T4L: You write that God’s mercies are greater than our trials. What about when the pain is so great you can’t even muster a prayer?

Kristen: It is so easy to magnify our trials and to belittle our blessings. We can easily be defined by our pain and view everything else, including the mercy God gives us, through its dim prism; rather than defining ourselves by God’s mercy, and seeing all else in that glorious light.

When we forget, it helps to simply name His mercies. What great and loving mercies has God brought to me? Has He given you food to eat? A family to love? Has He shown you compassion through fellow Christians? Hasn’t He promised never to leave you or forsake you? Hasn’t He made you a co-heir with Christ? Hasn’t He taken away your sin and forgiven your trespasses? Hasn’t He spoken to you through His Word? Hasn’t He given you light to see the glory of Christ? Hasn’t He set eternity with Him before you?

When my pain makes it hard to pray, even to take the next needed step, I’ve found it helpful to simply think about Christ dying for my sin and resurrecting to defeat death. I’m strengthened when I consider what Jesus endured so I could have everlasting hope in Him, so I would never perish in my sin. That perishing would be the worst suffering of all—but I don’t need to endure it now because He took it for me. God’s mercy is His gospel.

Now this doesn’t mean our trials don’t matter, or that reflecting on the gospel removes them, like a magic spell. But it does give us perspective in our darkest moments, and helps us rise from the pit of discouragement and despair. Our crosses have come, and sometimes terribly so and without end in this life. But his mercies are greater, and without end.

T4L: You encourage readers to be honest to God, to cry out to Him. What do you say to those who feel “good Christians” can’t pour out messy, overwhelming emotions?

Sarah: I’d say that God has given us His Word which shows us that he not only gives us permission to, but wants us to come to him honestly. I find such encouragement in the Psalms, as well as Job, where we see godly men bring their fears, complaints, anguish, sorrow, anger, and questions to the Lord in honesty. They weren’t turned away or struck dead for verbalizing faithless emotions, but rather were met with the comfort, strength, and hope of God’s promises and goodness. We were created emotional beings in the image of God. We can come honestly before our Maker and trust that He can handle our emotions.

I learned this in a fresh way immediately after we finished writing *Hope When It Hurts*. I felt as though I was hanging on by a thread. The burden I was carrying was almost too much to bear: four sick children, our oldest child’s challenges, my physical pain, and the anguish of watching our savings account drained by medical expenses. The morning I received the final draft of the book, I spent time praying and pleading with the Lord for his provision and strength. Less than an hour after I had

prayed, my husband learned that he had lost his job along with more than 60% of the salesforce. It was our only source of income.

I had so many emotions flooding my heart: fear, anger, confusion, numbness, shock, hurt. When I had asked the Lord for provision and strength, this wasn't what I had in mind. For about two weeks, I struggled to pray. I have always had a tendency to push my emotions aside, especially if they are uncomfortable ones, so I tried to just keep going and choose to trust.

Then I re-read the chapter I had written on emotions and found myself convicted by the words the Holy Spirit had given me months earlier. I was reminded that Christ wants all of us, not just the parts that are neat and tidy. What better place to bring our messy, confusing, faithless emotions than to the one who loves us and intimately knows us? We can come to Christ and pour out our hearts. And we can allow Him to pour in the truth of his goodness, sovereignty, love, and promises—even when we can't make sense of our circumstances.

T4L: Sarah, you've experienced personal pain with Lyme disease and seen the pain it has caused your family as well. How do you tap into hope when your children are suffering?

Sarah: That's a great question. It's hard to suffer, but it's even harder to watch your child suffer as you are helpless to do anything about it. While I continually grieve the pain that my children have had to endure at such young ages, I have already seen God bring blessing out of their trials.

Here are a few ways I've seen pain open their eyes (even if just a little) to the goodness of God:

- It's been used to stir up in them a dissatisfaction for the world, motivating them to seek something more lasting and satisfying.
- It's begun to open their eyes to their sinful nature and need for a Savior, since trials have a way of drawing our sinful nature to the surface.
- It's revealed their weaknesses, lack of control, and frailty, which I pray will continue to drive them towards dependence on Christ for salvation, strength, provision.
- It's begun to shift their view from an earthly one to an eternal one.
- It's teaching them to find comfort in God's Word, rather than their own solutions.
- It's teaching them to pray, rather than just complaining when life isn't going the way they had hoped.
- And most importantly, I believe they are learning to love Jesus more than anyone or anything else in this world.

"I have to trust that He will use these trials for His good purposes in their lives, just as I trust that He will do so in my own."

As much I wish I could remove suffering and sickness from their lives, I am learning that while their precious lives have been entrusted to us for a time, they are ultimately in the Lord's hands. I have to trust that He will use these trials for his good purposes in their lives, just as I trust that He will do so in my own. As a mom who desires to protect her children, this requires me to let go of control and lay them back

down at his feet moment by moment.

Thankfully, our children's outcomes are not up to us. Yes, we bear responsibility for what we do with the time we are given as their parents, but the Lord remains bigger than our greatest failures or successes. We can plant the seed, but only the Lord can give it life. We can water the soil, but only the Lord can grow our children up in him. It is God's grace that he does not call us to walk this hard road on our own. I have never been more thankful for this truth than I am right now.

T4L: For those who want to help and comfort others in their suffering, what is your best advice?

Sarah: Pray first, listen second, pray third, and speak last. The truth is, we are often uncomfortable with suffering and either say more than we should or don't say anything at all (which can be more hurtful). Yet over the last decade of deep suffering in our family, I have learned so much about comforting others.

"But Scripture tells us that our God is infinitely wise."

First of all, we don't have to suffer in the same way as another person in order to bring the comfort of Christ. Be cautious about making statements such as, "I know exactly how you feel," or "Things will get better." We need to learn to grieve with those who grieve and not be so quick to try to make the pain go away or offer a solution. We struggle with grieving with others because it's hard to watch someone suffer when you can't do anything about it. We have a tendency to want to save others from their pain, but Christ has not given us that role. He has, however, given us the role of comforting one another with the comfort we have received from Christ in our own time of suffering.

T4L: The losses we experience as a result of an illness can cause us to question why God takes good things from our lives. How have you come to view your own losses?

Kristen: Loss has caused me to consider God's wisdom. God knows better than I do what I need. I wrestle with this because what I think I need is typically a desire, rather than an actual need. When these desires are good—like exercise, activities, opportunities—I'm tempted to believe that God isn't being good to me when he takes them away. It's easy to view losses as...well, loss and loss alone. (And it's okay to grieve our losses. Oh, how we must!)

But Scripture tells us that our God is infinitely wise. It also says that everything is loss compared to knowing Christ, which is gain. So if God is wisely stripping good gifts from me, he must be helping me to know more of himself through those earthly losses. He must be creating more space in my self-centered heart for Christ. He must be teaching me to die to myself, take up my cross, and follow him—because to gain Christ is worth the loss of any earthly, good thing. I must ask myself every day if I believe this, and come to him with empty hands willing to receive all the good he has for me—and letting go of all the good I want for me.

T4L: For those who are bowed down with pain today, where can they find help and hope?

Kristen: Oh, friend, Sarah and I won't pretend to understand your pain. We don't. We can't. But God does. He sees you. He hears your pleas. He knows your heart, even if you haven't cried out to

him yet. He knows your pain. Because the Son of God took your punishment on the cross, he is intimately acquainted with suffering and knows the worst of it. And he went there for you so you may know the everlasting, enduring, joy-filled hope of trusting in him for salvation, both now and forever. Jesus was crushed for your sin so you would never be crushed: by sin, suffering, or any earthly trials.

Come to him. You can hear Jesus speak to you in the Bible, and you will find in him a Friend, Helper, Lord, and Savior who will never leave your side, not even in the darkest night of the soul. When it hurts, He will be your Hope.

T4L: Well, thank you both for this amazing interview! Hopefully we'll have another chance to talk to you again soon!

Three Critical Truths about the Sovereignty of God

By Brian Hedges

There is no theological issue more complicated than the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

And this is no mere academic question, for our understanding here (or lack thereof) significantly affects such practical areas as evangelism and prayer.

Prompted by an ongoing correspondence regarding predestination and free will, a friend asked me these thought-provoking questions:

- If God already knows what will happen (and what choices will be made, etc.), can He change the outcome?
- What is the purpose of prayer?
- Can our prayers for someone's salvation actually make a difference? In a way, I don't want my salvation to hinge on other people's prayers, yet neither do I want my prayers to accomplish nothing.

What follows is a slightly edited version of my response to my friend...

These thought-provoking questions cut to the heart of the issue. They place one in a theological quandary familiar to many. You want prayer to make a difference, yet you don't want such a tremendous matter as your soul's eternal salvation to rest ultimately in the prayers of fallible people. Those two concerns represent the two opposite and extreme positions so many adopt, but which we must carefully avoid.

On one side we have the extreme of determinism, or fatalism. This position basically says with Doris Day, "*Que será, será*; whatever will be, will be." It reasons, "Since God is sovereign and in control, it doesn't matter whether I pray or not. God knows His elect, and He will save them without my



help. He will do His will regardless of what I do or fail to do." On the other side of the issue, there are those who insist that "prayer changes things", and that God is actually *limited* to our prayers. They believe He either can't or won't work except in response to prayer.

Both of the above positions are *partly* true. The problem is not in what they affirm but in what they deny. While it's true that God is sovereign and will accomplish His will, it's not true that I don't need to pray. And while it is true that prayer changes things, it is not true that God is limited by my prayers. Our tendency is to take only one side of the truth and misuse it. We either sacrifice God's sovereignty on the altar of human responsibility, or vice versa. In either case, our mistake lies in emphasizing a biblical truth without regarding its intended function. The Scriptures clearly teach that God is sovereign in all things:

- God "works all things after the counsel of His own will" (Ephesians 1:11).
- God does His will "among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, 'What have you done?'" (Daniel 4:35).
- "The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all" (Psalm 103:19).

On the other hand, the Bible also clearly and forcefully affirms man's responsibility. In the realm of prayer, for example, we read that:

- "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working" (James 5:16).
- "You do not have, because you do not ask" (James 4:2).
- "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened" (Matthew 7:7-8).
- In nearly every one of his letters, Paul requests prayer and reports of his own intercession for his fellow believers (e.g. Ephesians 1:16-23; 3:14-21; 6:18-20).
- Paul prayed for the salvation of his fellow Jews: "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved" (Romans 10:1).

So how do we fit these two seemingly contradictory sides of Scripture together into one coherent paradigm? We must realize the following three things.

God's unchangeable nature does not cancel out His personal interaction with humanity.

God is immutable, or unchangeable. Psalm 102:27 declares of Him, "You are the same, and your years have no end." God Himself says, "I the Lord do not change" (Malachi 3:6). Hebrews 13:8 tells us that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." God knows all things from the beginning (Isaiah 46:9-11), and He does not change His eternal will. If He did, His wisdom or knowledge would be deficient. We must not rob God of His omniscience in our attempt to safeguard prayer's effectiveness.

But then you might remember instances in Scripture where God did "change His mind" in response to prayer. For example, after the children of Israel committed idolatry in worshiping the golden calf, God said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you" (Exodus 32:9-10). The next three verses record Moses' prayerful re-

sponse for God to remember His promises to the patriarchs and turn away His anger. Then verse 14 says, "The Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people."

Does this mean that God changed His mind about something He had planned to do from eternity? Does this text imply that God is not all-knowing? I don't think so. The Scriptures often speak of God "regretting" something. For example, 1 Samuel 15:10-11 says, "The word of the Lord came to Samuel: 'I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments.' And Samuel was angry, and he cried to the Lord all night." But in the very same chapter, we also read, "The Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret" (v. 29). So there is a sense in which God does regret and thus change His mind, and there is another sense in which He does not. God doesn't experience regret or change His mind in exactly the same ways we do.

God does not change because of a flaw in His nature. When Scripture says that God regrets something or changes His mind, we must understand those texts to speak of God's moral and personal response to people and events *considered in themselves*; it is not a response based on some deficiency in His knowledge or a change in His eternal will or purpose. God's unchangeableness does not cancel out His personal interaction with human beings.

"So, my friend, if we stick to the Scriptures it seems that both of your concerns are answered."

Prayer is one of God's ordained means of accomplishing His purposes.

The example of Moses given above is a perfect illustration. Consider also Daniel's prayers for the end of Israel's captivity in Babylon. According to Daniel 9:2, he knew that God had promised release after seventy years, but this didn't keep him from praying! Rather, it motivated him to pray. As Daniel 9:3 says, "Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes."

We learn from this that the true function of God's promises is always to motivate us to action, never to lull us into inactivity. God wants us to pray, but not because He can't act without us praying. As John Piper points out, God wants us to pray that He might be glorified (John 14:13) and that we might be satisfied in Him (John 16:24).

If we deny God's sovereignty over human choices and events, insisting that God will not infringe upon man's freedom, we actually do more damage to prayer than when we assert God's sovereign freedom.

Why should we ask God to save someone if He has already done all He can or will to save them? Should we not be focused solely on begging the person to comply with God? Or are we to pray things like, "Lord, please help Jim believe the gospel, but don't touch his free will" while Jim's biggest problem is his rebellious will bent on sin? Denying God's ability or authority to rule over the wills of men does not help prayer. It hinders prayer. Of course, a mystery still remains. We can't fully explain how God's sovereignty interrelates with man's will, but we know that we can't deny either.

So, my friend, if we stick to the Scriptures, it seems that both of your concerns are answered. "Can we pray that someone will be saved and it actually make a difference?" Absolutely. God has commanded His people to pray, and He uses our prayers to accomplish His purposes and glorify His name.

"Does this mean that the salvation of someone's soul hinges on my prayers for them?" No. A

person's salvation hinges on Christ's death on their behalf and the Holy Spirit's work in applying salvation to their heart. But neither do my prayers "accomplish nothing." For just as my hand animates and moves the glove I wear, so God animates and moves people to accomplish His purposes. The glove is not determinative; I am. But the glove is involved because it is filled with my hand. My prayers are not determinative; God is. But I am involved if I am filled with God's Spirit.

The True Meaning of Justice in the Work Place

By Matt Perman



Biblically speaking, to be just means to use your strength on behalf of the weak.

Justice most certainly includes an overall “fairness”, truth, integrity, honesty and refusing to show partiality. But the essence of justice goes beyond that. The essence of justice is that those with greater authority and influence are to use their stronger position *in service* of those who are in a weaker situation. Helping those in a “weaker situation” might mean helping those suffering from poverty or sickness or some other harm, but it doesn’t have to be. It means helping *anyone* without

the influence of formal authority you have. Which means, if you are a manager or leader in an organization (or in politics or anywhere), that it includes those who work for you.

Some people think that the biblical commands to be just in this sense and their corollary (radical generosity) do not apply inside the bounds of an organization. Inside an organization, “business rules” apply, which is interpreted to mean that people must be impersonal (a distorted notion of the concept of being “impartial”) and that doing things for your own advantage primarily is correct and right.

But this is wrong. The biblical commands to be generous and to be *just* apply in all areas of our lives, without exception. The Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12) and commands to be merciful as God is merciful (generous to all, especially the undeserving—Matthew 5:43-48) do not cease to apply at our jobs and in our work and in our organizations. They are not simply for the personal realm.

Their manifestation may look different in each area of life, but these principles of justice and generosity still apply in every area of life and we *must* be diligent to apply them in all areas. So, here’s one example: let’s take the workplace. Being just and generous in the workplace means that, if you

are in authority over people, you use that authority in the service of *everyone* you interact with—including those in the organization who directly work for you, those around the organization who don't work for you but you are in a position to influence, and those outside the organization that you interact with. It means you see yourself as a servant of all, and that you see your authority and position and role as existing *not* as some statement of how great you are or how hard you've worked, but rather as existing for the sake of those around you. Your authority exists to do them good.

Now, immediately here we run into “the fallacy of doing good,” which is the tendency of people to act contrary to the purpose and role of their vocations in in their attempts to “do good”, which ends up making things worse. One example might be a chef at a restaurant who gives away dozens of free meals every night out of a spirit of generosity, when it's not his restaurant and the owner has not given him the authority to do that. In this case, the chef's generosity of spirit is right, but the way he carries it out is not. (If he owned the restaurant or had been given the leeway to do that sort of thing by the owner, however, go for it!)

“So much here is about your spiritual attitude...”

So, what does using your authority and role to “do good” at your job look like when done right? A lot could be said, but let me just say one simple, yet core, thing. It means being *for* the people who work for you. Which means believing that they can excel and do good work and make a contribution, even when few other people might be able to see it. And it means *using your influence* to give them opportunities and, yes, advance their career whenever you have the chance.

Note I'm not saying you shouldn't be smart and discerning. But I am saying that you should have a default belief in people and therefore do whatever you can to give them a chance, to give them greater opportunities, and to give them a break whenever you can and whenever it seems they will be able to meet the opportunity and succeed in it. And it means, even when you aren't in a position at the moment to help advance someone or given them an opportunity, that you are encouraging and always seek to be the type of person that builds others up and helps them get better at what they do.

So much here is about your spirit and attitude—the *disposition* you have and with which you carry yourself. You need to see yourself as existing for the good of others, and charged with the responsibility from God to use any influence, authority, and resources you have in service to others. But note that I'm not simply saying “be for other people”. That is a critical thing, but it's not enough, because it's so easy to say that we are “for” someone but never take action. It's easy to say words that we don't back up with our behavior. The true disposition of a servant is to be for people *and* to be diligent and forward and effective in identifying ways to promote their welfare.

This is a call to give thought to improving in both our dispositions and our concrete actions. See yourself as existing in your role for the good of others, and be proactive in finding real opportunities to use your authority and influence and resources to serve others and build them up. That's a how true Christian operates in his job and lives his entire life.

Taking a Step Back in the Midst of Suffering

By Jason Helopoulos



The Westminster Shorter Catechism famously answers, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." This is to be the single greatest controlling influence in our lives. I confess that it is easy to talk about glorifying God and enjoying Him when things are going well and life is pleasant. I never have to tell my children to have a good attitude when we are eating ice cream

together! It almost seems natural. For the Christian, it is natural to glorify God when things are going well. It is quite harder, though, when things are difficult—when, as the Puritans used to say, "dark providence descends" or "God's frowning providence" comes upon us. And yet the Westminster Assembly was correct when it said that our *chief end* is—not just when things are going well or when life is pleasant and easy—to glorify God.

Paul sets a wonderful example for the Christian in this regard. For instance, think about the context of his writing the book of Philippians. He is sitting in prison, yet he gives no hint of self-pity. He doesn't even want the Philippians focusing upon him or worrying about his circumstances. He wants them to see all of his personal suffering, as he sees all of his personal suffering, in light of the glory of God. That is our challenge. **His glory is to be the lens by which we see all the circumstances of our lives.**

How did Paul do that? It is one of the most helpful practices when you are personally suffering as a Christian: Paul simply takes a step back. Have you ever looked at one of Monet's water lily paintings? If you look at it up close in a gallery, it appears to be simple splotches of paint. It looks disorganized and chaotic. The colors are bright and the strokes are evident, but the purpose of those colors and the benefits of those strokes are lost. If you then take a few steps back and gaze at the entire picture from the vantage point of the center of the room, a different reality sets in. A masterpiece is revealed. The colors are more muted; they aren't as harsh. The strokes disappear and they don't seem quite as disconnected. It actually becomes quite beautiful. Beautiful enough that museums and collectors will pay millions for it.

How do you glorify God in the midst of personal suffering? One of the best ways is by taking a step back and seeking to view your personal suffering in light of the glory of God. It isn't easy to do, I grant you that. But I do not think it was necessarily easier for Paul than it is for us. He was fallen as we are fallen. He was tempted by self-interest as we are tempted. But he learned to take a step back to see the grander purpose in view. He moved his focus from self to God's glory.

As he wrote in Ephesians 1, he knew that God "works all things according to the counsel of his will". *All things!* Oh, if we could see the secret plans of God! That His purpose and His will are working out our very salvation—and not only ours, but that of all the elect. With such a perspective, we would rejoice that He has appointed this affliction, this sorrow, this loss, because it is bringing about this glorious conclusion.

I realize you can't always see what He is doing and that can make it hard. But I also have found that He often grants us glimmers of His purposes—little things here and there—which give us perspective. Look for them. Look for the person who shows love to you in a way they haven't expressed before your trial, a conversation opened up with a person at work about Christ because they witnessed your suffering, the boldness it has given to your spouse to speak of the gospel, the neighbor who now approaches you with her struggles, the empathy you now have for others. **Train yourself to look for how God might be using your personal suffering, your loss, your trial for the benefit of others for His glory.** It can look like a mess from below, like looking at the back of stitch work. But if you can just angle to see a glimmer of the view from on high, you can begin to see that even these dark threads are creating an overall beautiful picture. And it allows one to rejoice in the midst of trial even as Paul did to the glory of God.

The Sovereignty of God: An Anchor in the Midst of the Storms of Life

By Christina Fox



When the storms of life wreak havoc on all you know and love, what theological truths anchor your soul? What doctrines do you turn to when the world around you seems to give way under your feet? What truths about God bring you the most comfort when life is uncertain, and nothing makes any sense?

Though all of God's word is essential for us to read, learn, memorize, and study, and though all of God's word teaches us all that we need to know to weather the storms of life, there is one theological truth that stands out in times of trial and suffering. There is one doctrine that brings everything into perspective and provides comfort and rest for our weary souls.

God's Sovereignty

To be sovereign means to have supreme power or authority. Kings are considered sovereign rulers over their nation. The United States is considered a sovereign nation because it governs and rules itself apart from any other foreign power or authority. God is the supreme sovereign because He is Creator and sustainer of all things.

He is ruler over the cosmos and over every living thing.

- "The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all" (Psalm 103:19).

God is sovereign over His creation.

- "I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things." (Isaiah 45:7)
- "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father." (Matthew 10:29)

He is sovereign over the affairs of mankind, including rulers and authorities.

- "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will." (Proverbs 21:1)
- "The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps." (Proverbs 16:9)

He is also sovereign over our salvation, sanctification, and glorification.

- "The God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you." (1 Peter 5:10)
- "And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified." (Romans 8:30)

And nothing and no one can thwart His sovereign plans.

- "All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, 'What have you done?'" (Daniel 4:35).

The doctrine of God's sovereignty doesn't stand on its own apart from the rest of Scripture. When we study God's sovereignty, we have to look at it in light of what Scripture teaches us about His character, for His character and sovereignty are interwoven together. Scripture teaches that God is holy, righteous, good, faithful, merciful, steadfast, and loving.

"God's sovereign plan and the way He rules and reigns over all things overflows from His character."

- "The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and

gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” (Exodus 34:6)

- “For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness.” (Psalm 33:4)

God’s sovereign plan and the way He rules and reigns over all things overflows from His character. For we who have been adopted as his children, God is not just a sovereign King who rules over His kingdom; He is also our good and loving Father who does all things holy, right, and true.

A Sovereign Comfort

The doctrine of God’s sovereignty brings us great comfort in the trials and sufferings of this life. When we are knocked on our feet by an unexpected trial, we can turn to these truths to remind ourselves that nothing happens outside of God’s sovereign control. When life feels as though everything is uncertain and in chaos, we can tell ourselves, “God is not surprised by this.” It is a reminder that though the trial we are facing is a complete surprise to us, it isn’t a surprise to God. He is never asleep or caught unawares. He is never at a loss wondering what to do. He doesn’t fret or worry over what’s happening.

This truth calms our hearts because we know that there are no accidents or random circumstances. God ordains and orchestrates all things. And because God is our good, loving, and faithful Father, we can rest in His holy purposes for us. Even when we don’t understand what is happening, we can trust that God’s plan is good because He is good. He is making us holy and will use every circumstance to that end. As the Heidelberg Catechism says, “He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.”

This doctrine also comforts us when we worry about the difficult choices we have to make in life. When we stand at the crossroads in our life, we can get caught up in the complex decisions of whether we should move or stay where we are, choose job A or B, this college or that college, this house or that house. We might fear making a wrong choice that forever marks our future. The truth is, we can’t interfere with God’s plans for us. Because God is sovereign, we don’t need to second-guess everything we do. God’s sovereign plans for us will take place just as He decreed them.

This truth also means that all of God’s promises for us will come to pass. God’s Word is filled with glorious promises that bring us great hope. These promises are not wishful thinking. They are not promises like those we make where we intend to follow through on them unless something happens otherwise. God’s promises will take place because nothing can stop them from taking place.

When He says, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28), we can be confident it will happen. When He says, “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6), it means that He *will* finish His work in us. When He says, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (John 6:37), we can be assured that we are secure in Christ. Because God is sovereign, nothing and no one can thwart his promises.

The doctrine of God’s sovereignty is an important one to study and learn during the calm seasons of life. Then when the rough winds blow and a fierce storm enters our life, we are already anchored to the truth. Rather than flounder in the seas of uncertainty and fear, we can rest in the sure comfort that all things are under our sovereign God’s care and control.

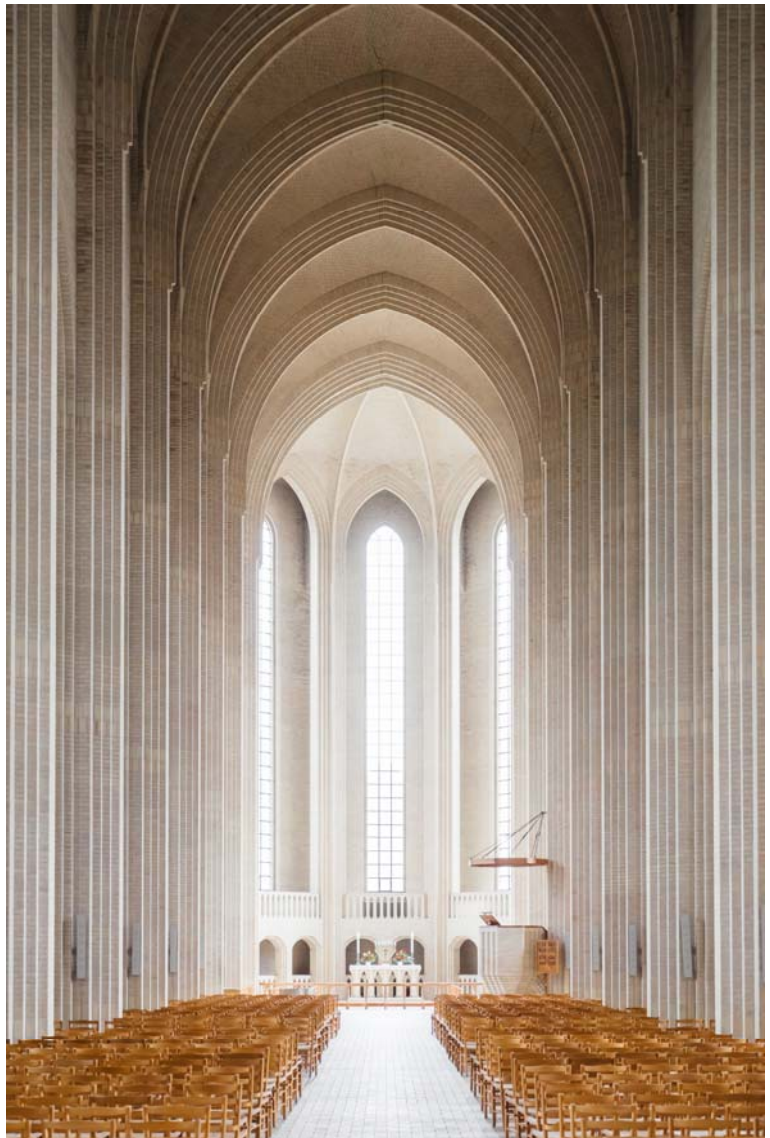
Four Powerful Outcomes of Sharing Your Pain with the Church

By Erik Reed

Churches are filled with people who are, and will be, experiencing hurts and disappointments in life. Jesus promised we would experience troubles in this world, but to take heart, He has overcome the world (John 16:33). Pain and suffering are marks of living in a fallen and broken world. We all know the reality of trials in our heads, but we tend to deny that reality in our hearts. People must be disciplined and shepherded towards a healthy theology of pain and suffering, or we create vulnerable Christians.

One of the most underutilized, yet most effective ways to prepare our churches to suffer, is to share our own. Sharing your pain with your church instructs in many ways. Unfortunately, many pastors fail to do it. Fear of looking weak or being too personal, lead many to neglect a powerful means of shepherding the flock of God. It requires us to be humble, open, and vulnerable. The rewards of this far outweigh the imagined risks we dread could happen.

I have been forced to do this the last 10 years of pastoring my church. My son, who is 11 years old, has had serious medical issues since birth. He has had a kidney transplant, over forty surgeries, and countless hospitalizations. Hiding our hurts and



pains is impossible. Rather than attempting to hide our pain, my wife and I have embraced sharing our pain, and in doing so, have watched the church learn to deal with the reality of suffering in a healthy way. Here are four powerful outcomes sharing your pain with your church can produce.

1. You are liberated from fiction of invincibility.

Many Christians act like pastors have an inside track to God. They think he has a special connection to God unavailable to others. This thinking also suggests pastors are off-limits from facing serious trials. When we as pastors never mention our struggles and hurts, we perpetuate all these false ideas. Sharing our pain in sermons, meetings, or personal relationships liberates us from the temptation to perpetuate a demeanor that everything is great, and shows our congregation we are not invincible. It takes time, thought, and intentionality, but it is worth it.

2. You get to model how Christians trust Christ through trials.

When people know you are going through difficulties and are able to witness your faithfulness, it teaches them how to navigate their own struggles.

When facing health issues or difficult decisions, your example of trusting Christ and leaning on Christ for strength and wisdom teaches your church. When struggling with a sin or an area of weakness, your humility in confessing it and surrounding yourself with accountability teaches your church how to fight sin and address weaknesses. When you get real with people about your pain and struggles, you become a model for how disciples of Jesus live.

“Good pastors are faithful pastors.”

3. You create a culture of honesty and safety.

When the pastor, who is viewed as the leader, is regularly honest about hurt, struggles, and trials, it breeds a culture of openness within the church. People feel safe to share their own stories. Sin is confessed. Facades of bliss come down and people become vulnerable about their issues. Our churches badly need honesty and safety. We have an air of bliss and my-act-is-together reeking in our churches. It needs to go. It starts with us, pastors. We strengthen that culture when we see and hear of others modeling this and we highlight and celebrate it.

4. You allow your congregation the blessing of ministering to you.

Good pastors are faithful pastors. Faithful pastors are usually loved by their church. Your church would love the blessing of being there for you. We are usually the one ministering to them. We give verses. We pray. We visit. But when we fail to share our struggles and pain, this ministry will be missing from our lives. Lest pride deceives us, we must acknowledge our need to be ministered to. Share with your church. Let them pray with you. Let them visit you to give encouragement. Read the verses they give you. Let them provide meals. A pastor who lets his church minister to him shows a beautiful humility, while simultaneously blessing those who minister to him.

Finally, brothers, determine in your heart, and look for ways, to share your pain. Be it personal insecurities, sin, relationship struggles, health issues, or something else, share those with your church. Exercise pastoral wisdom in what and how you share. Don't use a sermon to complain about a deacon making your life miserable. Share privately with trusted leaders before sharing publicly and use their feedback for sound judgment. A great question to ask is, “How can this pain, struggle, or trial help my church mature?” If you do this faithfully and consistently, you will find God is able to use your struggles to powerfully form the character and heart of Christ in your church.

Men's and Women's Devotional Bibles for Making and Growing Disciples of Christ

Find encouragement in the life-giving
Word of God along with sound devotional content
aimed at challenging hearts, enlightening minds, and
transforming lives into the image of Christ.



Recommended Reading on Suffering and God's Sovereignty

This season at Servants of Grace, we've been discussing suffering and justice, and what that means in light of God's sovereignty. In our world today, many people have a skewed view of what *justice* is and God's role in bringing that about. So many people are also confused as to how our suffering fits into a universe where God is sovereign over everything. With this issue of *Theology for Life Magazine*, it was our hope that readers would grow, not only in their understanding of how God's love and justice are not opposites, but work together in all things.

If you've found this subject interesting and want to study the issue further, please check out the recommended reading list below. These books are at the top of this genre in both excellence and readability.

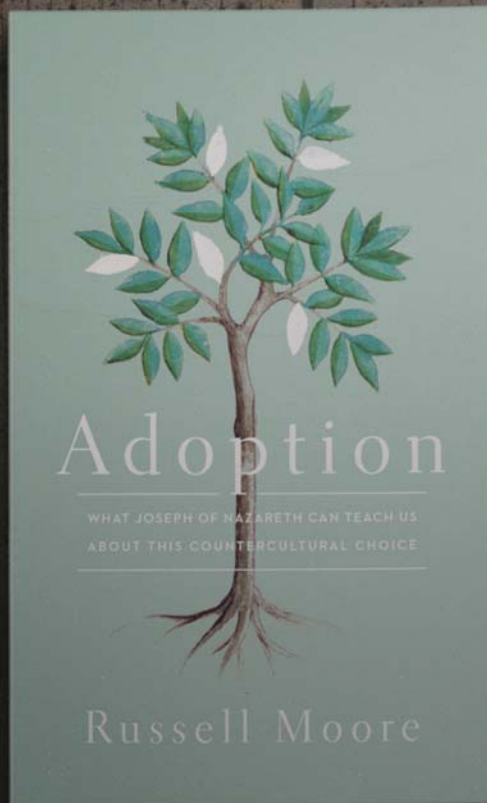
- *Hope When It Hurts: Biblical Reflections to Help You Grasp God's Purpose in Your Suffering* by Kristen Wetherell and Sarah Walton
- *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* edited by John Piper
- *Christians Get Depressed Too* by David Murray
- *Tempted and Tried* by Russell Moore
- *The Freedom of the Will* by Jonathan Edwards (1754)
- *The Doctrine of God* by John Frame (P&R, 2002)
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- *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Packer)
- *The Sovereignty of God* by A.W. Pink

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In Christ,

Sarah Jenkins
Design Coordinator and Editor of *Theology for Life Magazine*

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