

## “MAKING SENSE OF SUFFERINGS” (Psalm 147:1-11)

The issue of sufferings has perplexed people down the centuries. More often than not, the issue of sufferings is used to attempt to undermine our faith in the goodness of God. When bad things happen, we want answers. One writer sums it up,

“Sometimes, it is asked in other ways: Why do bad things happen to good people? Or, why do the wicked prosper, while the righteous take such a beating? Or, if God really has the power to stop human suffering, why doesn’t he use it? Eventually these questions become very personal. Why did my husband leave me after 15 years? Why did God allow my daughter to die in a car wreck? If God is good, how could he let my closest friend suddenly have a heart attack?”



However, making sense of suffering is just as difficult an issue for those of any other religious faith or none. For the existence of suffering needs to be explained by their worldview. And simply trying to use it as a stick to beat Christianity can easily backfire. The writer, C. S. Lewis embraced atheism because of all the evil and suffering he saw in the world. But this led him into a deeper philosophical hole. He records, “My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?”

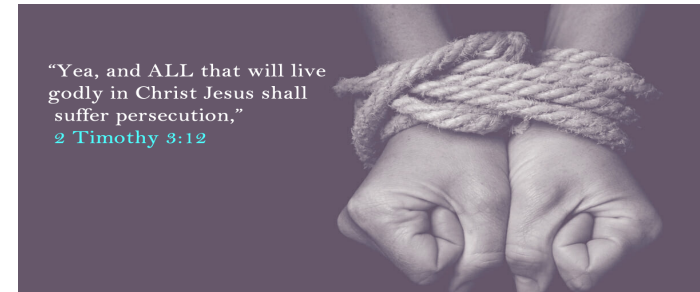
So the issues around suffering, invariably draw us back to the need to have an objective just and sovereign God to adequately resolve. Many professing Christians believe that God is silent on this question of suffering and the Bible has nothing to assist us. However, the Scriptures have enough light to guide us so that we will be able to testify “*all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose*” (Rom 8:28).

### REALITY OF SUFFERINGS

There are some religions and philosophical systems that argue that suffering is merely illusory. However, suffering is not an abstract concept. It was so real that our Lord Himself came to live in it, experience the full depth of it, conquer it, and redeem it, “*For in that he himself bath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.*” (Hebrews 2:18) Just as Christ’s suffering was real,

so is that of all mankind. Everybody suffers - whether you’re saved or lost. However, the believer has the blessing of having God with us in the suffering and the blessing of learning from the suffering to glorify God. The unsaved suffer for nothing!

The Lord Jesus Christ warned of their reality in the lives of His saints, “*in the world ye shall have tribulation*” (John 16:33). The word here for “*tribulation*” in Greek is *thlipsis*, meaning “anguish, burdens or persecution.” In His great Olivet discourse, Christ forewarned us that in the last days great troubles will fall upon us: “*Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name’s sake*” (Matt 24:9).



Complete avoidance of suffering is not an option for any of us. Terrible things sometimes happen to God’s people – just ask Job! To demand that God prevent suffering is to demand that He prevents one of the consequences of sin. 2 Timothy 3:12 warns, “*Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.*” In fact, the Apostle Paul took this further and embraced certain sufferings as a blessing, “*That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death!*” (Philp. 3:10).

### ROOT OF SUFFERINGS

Death, pain, grief, loneliness, and all other types of suffering were not part of God’s original world (Gen 1:31; 3:17-19; 5:29; Rom 5:12,14,18; 8:20-22; 1 Cor 15:21-22; Rev 21:3-4). All mankind has inherited the pollution of the sin nature from Adam which is to blame for the curse that the world is under. All sickness and suffering in the world is because mankind fell in Adam. God said everything He had created was good. Even the devil before he fell the Bible states was perfect (Ezekiel 28:15). There was no suffering prior to sin. Every bad thing that has happened in the world since then is ultimately the result of man’s sin - and sin has consequences. We are in a suffering world because we are in a world scarred by sin. Therefore, it is wrong to blame God for the entrance of suffering into the world.

### REASONS FOR SUFFERINGS

The root cause of the entrance of suffering into this world is sin. But God does not hide the fact that He sovereignly rules over the affairs of men. A Sovereign God is in control of the purpose and plan for our lives. Nothing can touch our lives that God does not permit and nothing can thwart God’s ultimate design for us. There is no other biblical alternative. God’s sovereignty is:

- (1) Founded on His infinite wisdom (Job 12:13; Eph. 1:11)
- (2) Eternal (Eph. 3:11)
- (3) Universal – there is not a rogue molecule outside of His rule (Psa. 135:6; Isa. 46:9-11)
- (4) Unchangeable (Mal. 3:6)

It was a sovereign all wise God who decided to let suffering enter the world as a consequence of sin. Our personal trials are never caused by blind fate or bad luck. In a number of Scriptures, the Lord is up front that He sent suffering directly or permitted it to occur,

**I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil (or disaster): I the LORD do all these things. (Isaiah 45:7).**

**And the LORD said unto him, Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the Lord? (Exodus 4:11)**

The Lord doesn't explain why He allowed suffering in every particular situation. It is revealed that His ways are above our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9) and we are, at times, to simply accept by faith that He has a higher unexplainable purpose (cf. Hab. 2:4). Unfortunately, fallen man recoils from such a declaration and demands the right to explain away everything.

It is comforting to know that there is a reason for our sufferings. They are not without purpose or plan. It would be terrible to suffer and have to conclude it is the result of blind, pitiless fate. We must not trust our feelings as an accurate guide for you are unlikely to feel joyful, grateful or full of trust when you are in the white heat of the crucible of suffering. Faith in God's promises and not feelings must always lead our conclusions. Our lack of ability to answer every question about suffering perfectly does not mean that we cannot offer some provisional answers. There are many possible purposes revealed in the Scripture for suffering in the lives of believers. Let me suggest some:

### (1) PURPOSE OF CHASTISEMENT

God can use suffering to chastise an errant believer. Revelation 3:19 says, "*As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.*" Notice these important words from Hebrews 12:6-7: "*For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?*" The loving parent knows that discipline is necessary for a child to develop right attitudes and actions. Often the child misinterprets, at least initially, the purpose of that discipline. The same is true with us and our Heavenly Father. Miriam was struck with leprosy for her sin in opposing Moses' role as God's spokesman (Num. 12:1-10). God can even allow others to suffer for our sins (cf. 2 Sam. 12:14-18). When a believer suffers it is right that he or she should prayerfully undergo self-examination in this area. However, not every suffering in the life of a believer is a direct result of God chastising his or her sin. Job had not sinned when God allowed the devil to bring the great trials upon his life (cf. Job 1:1, 22). The late RC Sproul describes an encounter with such a conundrum,

"I once visited with a woman who was dying from uterine cancer. She was greatly distressed, but not only from her physical ailment. She explained to me that she had had

an abortion when she was a young woman, and she was convinced that her disease was a direct consequence of that. In short, she believed cancer was the judgment of God on her. The usual pastoral response to such an agonizing question from someone in the throes of death is to say the affliction is not a judgment of God for sin. But I had to be honest, so I told her that I did not know. Perhaps it was God's judgment, but perhaps it was not. I cannot fathom the secret counsel of God or read the invisible hand of His providence, so I did not know why she was suffering. I did know, however, that whatever the reason for it, there was an answer for her guilt. We talked about the mercy of Christ and of the cross, and she died in faith."

### (2) PURPOSE OF TEACHING

God can send suffering to teach us valuable lessons. Paul tells us of a purpose in an instance of his suffering to keep him humble and dependent, "*And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure*" (2 Cor. 12:7). He learned that God's grace was sufficient in the darkest of days.



James tells us that "*the trying of your faith worketh patience*" (James 1:3) and Paul tells us that, "*tribulation worketh patience*" (Romans 5:3). We become less self-confident and proud when we are going through the crucible of suffering. It drives us to our knees. We get much more serious about seeking God. David testified that he had learnt precious biblical lessons in his suffering, "*It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes*" (Psa. 119:71). There are precious lessons we can only learn when we are put in the "School of Hard Knocks." Strong faith is the product of hard times. Job spoke of this experience when he declared of the Lord, "*He knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold*" (Job 23:10). During the struggles of life, God is personally teaching us so much. C. S. Lewis famously observed, "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."

### (3) PURPOSE OF SHOWING CHRIST

The image of Christ is especially seen in our lives when we suffer for Christ's sake. For we walk in His footsteps as we suffer for righteousness, "*For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps.*" (1 Peter 2:21) A classic illustration of this is

seen in the martyrdom of Stephen. After boldly proclaiming the truth of the Gospel, Stephen knew he couldn't face this trial in his own strength. So, he looked up to the source of power, *"But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God."* Before he reached glory, he experienced it. Stephen acknowledged that he needed grace to die well for the glory of God, *"And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."* That is what the old theologians call "dying grace." We see the image of Christ stamped on his character. As Stephen felt the blows of the pointed stones raining on his body, his only thought was to witness more for the Lord Jesus Christ, *"And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."*



Stephen doesn't lash out in anger but prays for them in love. He likely cried with a loud voice because he wanted them to all hear his last words of intercession. God gave Stephen the grace to pray for his murderers and then God took him home from any further suffering, *"And when he had said this, he fell asleep."* This martyrdom was not the end of Stephen's life but simply the end of his life on earth. He now enters the glory of eternal rest. By his words and actions, Stephen takes this final opportunity to testify to his murderers that Jesus Christ is truly alive.

So, God often uses suffering to allow the life of Christ to be manifested in our mortal flesh (2 Cor. 4:7-11; cf. 2 Cor. 1:5; Gal. 6:17). That is why Paul embraced and looked to further experience the *"fellowship of His sufferings"* (Philp. 3:10).

#### (4) PURPOSE OF HELPING OTHERS

God uses suffering in the life of a saint to work purposes in the lives of other believers (Philp. 1:14; 4:12-15). The Lord used the sufferings of Job to prove a point to the devil and also to the discerning reader. Job never got the information that we get of the cause of his trials, but we are taught much through his sufferings. It was many years after his enslavement and imprisonment that Joseph understood that God had used his sufferings to save the lives of others, *"But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive."* (Gen. 50:20) The Apostle Paul suffered more than any of the other apostles. Indeed, after he was converted the Lord revealed to Ananias that Paul's life would be marked by great service but also great suffering, *"But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake."* (Acts 9:15-16) It was Paul himself who later taught that one of the blessings of

suffering is that it enables us to comfort others who are weak, *"Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God"* (2 Cor. 1:3-4). Through your school of suffering, God wants to broaden your perspective to be like His to minister to others.

#### (5) PURPOSE OF FURTHERING THE GOSPEL

God sometimes uses suffering to reach people with the gospel. For instance, in 2 Kings 5 we read that it was through the awful disease of leprosy that Naaman heard about the Lord. Suffering is part of the struggle for the gospel (cf. 2 Tim 2:8-9; Acts 5:41; 1 Pet. 4:14). Elijah suffered the effects of the drought for 3 and a half years with the nation of Israel. Another classic illustration of this is found in the persecution of the early church in Acts 8. For we read the loss of their homes and possessions resulted in the furtherance of the gospel, *"And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles. . . . Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word."* (Acts 8:1b, 4)

#### (6) PURPOSE OF PREPARING US FOR HEAVEN

It is all too easy in our materialistic world for us to allow our possessions to possess us. We can start to love earth so much that our longing for heaven wanes. God sometimes permits suffering to make us more aware that life is temporal and there is a better life to come (2 Cor. 4:17-18). Pain becomes a warning light to avert the danger of complacency and seeking satisfaction in this life. Jesus Christ does not guarantee a smooth journey in life, but only a perfect landing in a perfect eternity. The Bible tells us in Revelation 21:4 that there is coming a time when *"God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."* Our continual cry should be *"Even so, come, Lord Jesus"* (Rev. 22:20).

### CONCLUSION

God does not owe blessing or life to any person because we are all sinners. There is no such thing as an "innocent person." As the sovereign Creator, He has the absolute right to give and take life. Some will die when they are eight, some others at eighteen, and some at eighty. God decides the time but remember all eventually leave this world in death. As God is the ultimate source of all that you have, He has the absolute right to take that which belongs to Him. In the end, you will have to leave it all behind. There are times that He decides to exercise His sovereign rights that do not suit our timetable. We don't get to choose our troubles or the timings. The Christian life is a blessed life but it is not an easy life.

We are so used to God's gracious workings in our lives in terms of blessings that we forget and are unthankful that they are grace, which by definition is undeserved. The glorious truth is that God has done something to deal with the root cause – He sent His Son to deal with the problem of sin. He has even guaranteed the future immortality and sinless glorification of our bodies. One day there will be justice in which good wins, and evil loses. The Judge of all of the earth always does right (cf. Gen. 18:25). He can be trusted that He knows best in what He is doing

in our lives, "*Great is our Lord, and of great power: his understanding is infinite.*" (Psalm 147:5) He does not promise all the answers here but He does promise to walk with us through all our sufferings.

There is no immunity from sufferings even for the believer. It will be our constant companion till we arrive in glory. We can go through our sufferings either trusting God or doubting God. But there is coming a day when, "*God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.*" (Rev. 21:4). Let us hold on to that truth in this discussion. An infinitely better day is coming. It all ends well.