



## **THE CROSS AND SUFFERING**

### **Secret Church**

If you have a Bible and that book that we are calling a study guide tonight, let me invite you to pull it out. Over 50,000 different people in 20 different nations around the world are gathered together to consider "The Cross and Suffering." Our largest Secret Church ever.

I want to cut to the core from the very beginning. We don't have a lot of time to waste as you may have concluded from that study guide that you hold in your hands. I am overwhelmed when I think about this topic and over 50,000 different people. To think of 50,000 different lives and the thousands of you, here and around the world, who have walked through deep grief and painful trials in your lives. Many of you have lost husbands or wives, parents, children, young children. Thousands of you have walked through cancer or tumors or other debilitating diseases, either yourself or with someone you know and love. Many of you have experienced tragedy beyond anything that I can personally begin to fathom. Some of you are walking through suffering right now; some of you are living in the middle of deep pain and hurt tonight, and none of us knows what the next week holds...what lies around the corner...what suffering, what tragedy may lie ahead.

I don't mean to paint a dismal picture from the start, but the reality is out of over 50,000 people, every single one of us has either known, is knowing right now, or will know deep and painful suffering in this world. I am praying that God will take His Word and just gently, softly, pointedly apply it in 50,000 different ways and 50,000 different lives tonight. My prayer is that you will be strengthened and sustained and ultimately satisfied when we think about the Word and what it says about suffering.

So I'm praying that, and I'm praying that you will be challenged tonight to embrace suffering for the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth. At every Secret Church, we talk about how this night is not just intended for you. The point is not for us only to be encouraged and strengthened and comforted, but the point is for us to be equipped to go into our communities and go into the nations to strengthen and encourage others with the Word of God. My prayer is tonight, that God will raise up an army of 50,000 plus people who are willing to make the good news, that we are going to talk about, known to the ends of the earth.

So, I was corresponding with John Piper not long ago about something else, and Pastor John has taught me much about suffering through what he has written and preached and how he's lived. His influence is all over what we are going to talk about tonight, but as he and I were corresponding, he wrote to me, and he told me he was praying for Secret Church, and this is what he said. He said: "David, may the Lord give you unusual unction for the Secret Church on suffering. And may God make that night epoch-making in the history of His advance among the nations." I read that, and I said, "God, may it be so! May this night be epoch-making in the history of God's advance among the nations, as 50,000 people walk out of here tonight, I pray, gladly, willingly choosing to embrace suffering for the spread of God's gospel to the hardest to reach people on the planet."

So, I've got high expectations for our time together tonight. Obviously, we have a lot of ground to cover. I hope you've chosen wisely who you're sitting next to tonight, because you will need them to help you with your notes; some of you to help you stay awake.

Sometimes people ask, "Why do you try to cover so much?" Remember the whole premise behind Secret Church. When I've been in underground house churches around the world, and they've gathered together in a secret location at the risk of their lives, they want to make the most of that time. They can process truth, think through truth, meditate on truth later. They want the Word, especially if they don't have the Word. So that's what I want to do. I want to give you as much Word as possible tonight. Let's drink from the fire hydrant of inspired Scripture, so that you can process in the days to come; so that you have as much Word as possible to go into your communities and into the nations and tell them how the cross of Christ is the only hope for a world mired in suffering.

So, let the fire hydrant begin. The Bible is honest about suffering from cover to cover. Habakkuk 1:2, "*O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save?*" We'll look more at that text later. Go ahead and move on. John Stott said, "The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith, and has been in every generation." This is huge.

## **The World Around Us...**

### **Suffering is a global reality.**

Consider the world around us where suffering is a global reality. We live in a world full of natural evil. I'm talking about evil...when I say natural evil...that is not necessarily or directly caused by someone's individual sin. I'm talking about diseases. Almost 50,000 people contracted HIV last week alone; approximately 40,000 others died of AIDS last week. This next statistic is specifically from the United States National Cancer Institute: In the next year, over 1.5 million people will be diagnosed with cancer; over 500,000 people will die of cancer. Based on current trends, almost 50% of men and women born today will be diagnosed with cancer at some point in their lifetimes. So, let that just soak in. Either you or the person next to you will get cancer at some point. Diseases.

Disasters. You think about the last five to ten years, hundreds of thousands of people have died instantly in earthquakes in Haiti and China, in a cyclone in Myanmar, and in a tsunami in Southeast Asia. That's random events, and you put on top of ongoing natural disasters. Over 13 million people are currently suffering amid famine and food shortages, specifically, in the Horn of Africa, which we're focusing on tonight; hundreds of thousands of people today are on the brink of starvation.

Diseases, disasters, and death. Approximately 25,000 children under the age of five die every day due to poverty. That's over 9 million children every year dying because of poverty. Almost 40% of those children die during the first month of their lives. That's children in poverty. More generally, over 150,000 people die every day in the world. That's over 60 million people who will die this year. Piper put it in perspective. He said, "One hundred [people] are dying each minute. If you could hear them all, you'd hear so many screams you'd go insane. Only God can hear them all and not go insane. God parcels out our awareness in small amounts lest we go under. How can you live in a world like that as a loving person and rejoice in the Lord?"

That's a huge question. We live in a world full of natural evil, and a world full of moral evil. A world full of slavery and abortion, beatings and murders, robberies and riots, torture and rape, discrimination and persecution, which is obviously part of the point of our gathering tonight; to remind ourselves that persecution is real for many of our brothers and sisters around the world. A world full of war and terrorism, violence and genocide.

Based on all this, it is easy to conclude that suffering is a universal experience. All people experience suffering. All people everywhere in the world, and obviously included in that, all Christians undergo suffering. The Christian is not immune to suffering. Now, there's some theologies circulating today that if you follow Jesus, you will experience prosperity, not suffering. One of my goals tonight is to blow that theology right out of the water. It's not true. All Christians undergo suffering.

Now, this is where I want to go ahead and explain that when I talk about suffering in the Christian's life tonight, I'm going to include under that one banner, all types of suffering. So, sometimes Christians suffer in the same ways that non-Christians suffer. Christians and non-Christians get cancer, right? There's some suffering that is universal. At the same time, there is some suffering that is uniquely Christian. I'm talking about Christians who suffer because of their faith, because of their proclamation of the gospel of Christ. Christians are persecuted for their allegiance to Christ, and while those types of suffering are definitely different in some respects, I'm going to treat them both generally under the same umbrella, and the reason I'm going to do that is because Satan's design and God's design in both types of suffering is the same.

Satan intends every type of suffering to sabotage us. Satan intends cancer and persecution to sabotage us. On the other hand, God intends every type of suffering to sanctify us. God intends cancer and persecution to sanctify us. So, there are different types of suffering that we experience as Christians, which we'll talk about, but I'm going to treat them all under one banner of suffering that God intends for our sanctification, and Satan intends it for our destruction.

### **Suffering is a personal struggle.**

Suffering is a universal experience, but it's not just broad. Suffering is a personal struggle, not just for the whole human race, but for individual men and women who experience physical pain and emotional hurt. In the midst of all of it, every single one of us has intellectual questions. Why do evil and suffering exist? Where is God in the middle of suffering? How can I suffer well? When will my suffering end? How can God be good and allow so much evil in the world? How can God be gracious and ordain such suffering in my life?

These are real questions that we all wrestle with. You do, I do, we all wrestle with these questions, and the world is full of insufficient answers to those questions. Atheism says, "God and evil do not exist." If there's so much evil and suffering in the world, then there's no way there can be a God over the world. Noted atheist Andrew Weisberger wrote, "None can account for the tremendous amount of suffering in a world in which an allegedly omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good God reigns...The conclusion to which we are drawn, therefore, is that the existence of such a God is implausible." Even C.S. Lewis, talking about his life before he became a Christian, said,

"Not many years ago when I was an atheist, if anyone had asked me, 'Why do you not believe in God?' my reply would have run something like this: 'Look at the universe we live in...History is largely a record of crime, war, disease, and terror... But all civilizations pass away and, even while they

remain, inflict peculiar sufferings of their own... Every race that comes into being in any part of the universe is doomed; for the universe, they tell us, is running down... All stories will come to nothing: all life will turn out in the end to have been a transitory and senseless contortion upon the idiotic face of infinite matter. If you ask me to believe that this is the work of a benevolent and omnipotent spirit, I reply that all the evidence points in the opposite direction. Either there is no spirit behind the universe, or else a spirit indifferent to good and evil, or else an evil spirit.”

So that’s atheism’s answer: God and evil don’t exist. We’ll explore these more later. I just want to browse through them now. Christian Science: Evil is illusory. New Age: Evil is the result of ignorance. Dualism: Good and evil are two forces, equal in power and opposite in purpose, kind of like a Star Wars theme. Good and evil fighting each other. Fatalism: Blind fate determines the depth of evil in our lives and in the world. We’re just products of destiny. Process Theism says God’s power is always evolving; He is limited in His ability to prevent evil.

So, this is Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote the bestseller, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, and he said, “It is too difficult even for God to keep cruelty and chaos from claiming their innocent victims.” God’s power is limited; that’s why we have evil and suffering. Or, Open Theism says God’s knowledge is always increasing; because He has limited information, He sometimes makes errors in judgment. Clark Pinnock, noted open theist, wrote,

Decisions not yet made do not exist anywhere to be known even by God. They are potential—yet to be realized but not yet actual. God can predict a great deal of what we will choose to do, but not all of it, because some of it remains hidden in the mystery of human freedom...The God of the Bible displays an openness to the future that the traditional view of omniscience simply cannot accommodate.

In other words, God is not omniscient; He’s not all-knowing, and because He doesn’t have all knowledge, then sometimes things go wrong. My aim tonight is to show you that every single one of those are insufficient answers, and they leave us empty with an intense longing for something else. We don’t want thoughts from men; we want truth from God. We want truth from God in a world of suffering around us.

## **The Word Before Us...**

So, we come to the Word before us, and the Bible addresses suffering honestly. You have psalmists crying out for answers. The Bible addresses suffering effectively. I love Psalm 119:92: “*If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.*” Did you hear that? God’s law, God’s Word, keeps us from perishing in our affliction. Martin Neimoller, a German pastor who spent years in Dachau, a Nazi concentration camp that I visited a couple of years ago, talked about the Bible, saying,

What did this book mean to me during the long and weary years of solitary confinement and then for the last four years at Dachau? The Word of God was simply everything to me—comfort and strength, guidance and hope, master of my days and companion of my nights, the bread which kept me from starvation and the water of life that refreshed my soul.

The Bible addresses suffering effectively; the Bible addresses suffering theologically, meaning, the Bible addresses suffering from a God-centered point of view. Everything tonight revolves around the character of God. So, the classic argument against the existence of God in light of evil and suffering in the world goes all the way back to the fourth century, Epicurus, who said, "Either God wants to abolish evil, and cannot; or he can, but does not want to; or he cannot and does not want to. If he wants to, but cannot, he is impotent [not powerful]. If he can, and does not want to, he is wicked [not good]. But, if God both can and wants to abolish evil, then how comes evil in the world?"

Now, those questions are deeply theological. Does God exist? If He does, how good is God? How good is He? Is He loving or is He malicious? How good is God, and how great is God? Is He all-knowing? Is He all-powerful? The Bible addresses every one of these questions. Now, at the same time, the Bible addresses suffering mysteriously. The last thing I want to do tonight is to claim that there are easy answers to the suffering that you and I experience. There is mystery here. "*The secret things belong to the LORD our God...*" Deuteronomy 29:29. J. Rodman Williams said, "Because all Christian doctrines relate to God who is ultimately beyond our comprehension, there will inevitably be some element of mystery, or transcendence, that cannot be reduced to human understanding. Nonetheless, within these limits the theological effort must be carried on."

Now, I want to make sure to be clear on what I mean by "mystery." I don't mean contradiction. The Bible is not filled with contradictions that are untrue. I'm not talking about paradox either; something that appears to be a contradiction or even absurd, but when closely examined, it proves to be true. Or an antinomy: A combination of two thoughts or principles, each of which is true in its own right but which we cannot harmonize. When I say mystery, I'm talking about an assumed truth which the human mind cannot comprehend, but which we accept by faith. Not contradictions, and not just mere paradoxes or antinomies, but mysteries.

John Calvin said, "Man with all his shrewdness is as stupid about understanding by himself the mysteries of God, as [a donkey] is incapable of understanding musical harmony." Well said, John.

## **The Journey Ahead of Us...**

So, with that basis, here's the journey ahead of us. We want to explore suffering in all of Scripture. What we're going to do tonight is cover 75 key texts in the Old Testament, split up into these sections: the Pentateuch...first five books of the Old Testament, the Book of the Law...the Historical Books, Psalms and Wisdom Literature, and we'll close the Old Testament with the Prophets. So, we are going to go from Genesis straight to Malachi. Then, we'll pick up in the New Testament with the Gospels, move into Acts, and then I've grouped the Pauline Letters together, so we'll go a little out of order in the Bible there. Then, we'll look at the General Letters, written by Peter, James, Jude, John, and whoever in the world wrote the book of Hebrews.

We're going to browse through 75 key texts. We're going to fly through, but my goal was to say, "Okay, if people are going to walk away knowing what the Bible says about suffering, what are 75 key texts for understanding that?" We're going to browse through them all, and then come to five foundational conclusions at the end of our time. I cannot wait to get to these because they are rocks for you to stand on in the midst of a shifting, suffering world.

They are rock-solid truths that do strengthen and sustain and satisfy in the midst of suffering, but they won't make sense until we have gone through all of Scripture.

Now in all of this, we want to exalt Christ tonight. Good Friday is the perfect night to study this topic. The cross of Christ is the center of all Scripture (and all history!). Everything points to the cross, and...follow this...the cross of Christ is the key to understanding all suffering. If we want to discover the mystery of suffering, then we must start by beholding the majesty of the cross. A right understanding of the cross leads to a right understanding of suffering; a wrong understanding or an incomplete understanding of the cross, leads to a very confused understanding of suffering.

I want to show you tonight how everything in all history, including suffering, was planned...I want to show you how suffering was planned for Good Friday. The reason we have suffering in the world has everything to do with Good Friday. Everything in all history, including suffering, was planned for Good Friday, and, ultimately, points to Good Friday. Everything before the cross points forward to it; everything since the cross points back to it. Everything that will last was purchased on it; everything that matters hinges on the cross. The cross is the key to understanding suffering.

So, we want to exalt Christ and the cross in all Scripture, and as we do, we want to examine our hearts. We want to ask some questions tonight. First and fundamental question we want to ask tonight is, "Have I been saved?" There is no more important question for any one of us to ask tonight than that. I want to ask 50,000 different people tonight, "Have you been saved?" I'm praying that God will do a work in many hearts tonight to save you from eternal suffering.

Midway through this passage in 2 Thessalonians, the Bible talks about

*when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might...*

I want you to see Revelation 20, that there is coming a day when the book of life will be opened before God in heaven, "and if anyone's name [is] not found written in the book of life, he [will be] thrown into the lake of fire.

Religious games will not matter on that day; nominal belief will not matter on that day. Those who played religious games and settled for nominal belief, many of whom thought that they were Christians, will be cast into eternal, everlasting suffering. I am praying that God would wake up some hearts tonight, to be delivered from everlasting suffering.

For that matter, nominal belief won't sustain you amidst earthly suffering, either. Randy Alcorn said, "A nominal Christian often discovers in suffering that his faith has been in his church, denomination, or family tradition, but not Christ. As he faces evil and suffering, he may lose his faith. But that's actually a good thing. I have sympathy for people who lose their faith, but any faith lost in suffering wasn't a faith worth keeping."

The biblical reality is only those who endure in faith until the end will be saved. Colossians 1, "if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard..." Hebrews 3, "For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end."

So let's, every one of us, examine our hearts and ask the question tonight, "Have I been saved?" Then, let's take it a step deeper and ask, "Am I prepared to suffer?" Here's the deal: you and I know that it's in times of suffering that some of the worst theology comes out of people's mouths. People say some of the most untrue things in the midst of trial as they're grasping for something to comfort them, and they are longing for explanations. People...I'm talking Christians here...come to some very unbiblical conclusions, and they end up trying to stand on sinking sand.

Now, what makes this difficult is that the middle of suffering, that's usually not the best time to correct theology. When someone is weeping over the loss of a loved one, and they say something that is totally unbiblical, that's usually not the best time to pull out a sermon on suffering. So, part of my purpose tonight is to prepare you to suffer. I want to give you rock-solid truth to stand on, so that you don't go grasping for sinking sand when tragedy comes. D.A. Carson said,

"We do not give the subject of evil and suffering the thought it deserves until we ourselves are confronted with tragedy. If by that point our beliefs—not well thought out but deeply ingrained—are largely out of step with the God who has disclosed himself in the Bible and supremely in Jesus, then the pain from the personal tragedy may be multiplied many times over as we begin to question the very foundations of our faith."

That's what I want to avoid for you. At the same time, I know that no matter how much we talk about or think about suffering and how to respond in the middle of suffering, nothing can completely prepare us for the shock that comes when suffering hits. When you are sitting at your desk or in a restaurant or driving home in your car, and you get a call that something has happened to your spouse or one of your children; when you are shaving in the morning after your quiet time with God, and you feel the lump on your neck; when you leave for a business trip or maybe even a mission trip, and something happens to you or to your family back home. In an instant, the world around you is turned upside down, and none of it makes sense. It's like jumping into bitterly cold body of water. You can brace yourself for the experience all day, but when you actually jump in, the shock to your system just snatches your breath away.

However, what I want to do tonight is help you to be as ready as possible when you get that phone call or feel that lump or witness that scene that you never could have imagined. I want you to be prepared in that moment to stand on biblical foundations, gospel foundations. Piper said, "Wimpy worldviews make wimpy Christians. And wimpy Christians won't survive the days ahead."

Am I prepared to suffer, and am I ready to die? Ultimately...ultimately, that's my goal tonight. I want to so feed you God's Word in such a way that it lodges so deeply within your heart that you are ready to die; that you can truly say, from the depth of your being, "*For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain,*" (Philippians 1:21). That's a weird way to live, and that perspective is very radical in this world, but it's biblical. Carson said, "Whatever the church does, it should prepare its members to face death and meet God."

So, we want to examine our hearts, and ask these questions. We want to equip one another, like we've talked about. Just like Paul in Acts 14. As soon as the early Christians at Lystra and Iconium and Antioch came to Christ, Paul told them, "*...through many tribulations [they] must enter the kingdom of God.*" We want to equip one another, tonight, to stand firm on the Word, and to spread the gospel in the world. To say with Paul in Acts

20:24, *"I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."*

Howard Guinness asked, and I want to ask 50,000 people, "Where are the men and women of this generation who will hold their lives cheap, and be faithful even unto death, who will lose their lives for Christ's, flinging them away for love of him? Where are those who will live dangerously, and be reckless in this service?"

I want to propose to you, tonight, that that call is not just for "super-Christians." That call is for every single follower of Jesus Christ. So, tonight we want to examine our hearts and equip one another so that, in the end, we embrace suffering in our lives, our families, and our churches. Not because suffering is easy, but because suffering is worth it. I want you to see that suffering is worth it!

To experience the sufficiency of Christ in our weakness, 2 Corinthians 12. Suffering is worth it too, to share the sufferings of Christ on this earth. Philippians 3, Colossians 1, we are going to look at all of these texts later. Suffering is worth it to show the supremacy of Christ to all nations. Matthew 24, and one of my favorite quotes from C.T. Studd, the wealthy Englishman who sold all that he had to go to China and then India, and then, when it was time to retire, he threw retirement aside and spent his last days in Africa until he died. He roused the church to action on behalf of people who had never heard the gospel, and he said:

"Believing that further delay would be sinful, some of God's insignificants and nobodies in particular, but trusting in our Omnipotent God, have decided on certain simple lines, according to the Book of God, to make a definite attempt to render the evangelization of the world an accomplished fact.... Too long have we been waiting for one another to begin! The time for waiting is past! The hour of God has struck! In God's holy name let us arise and build! We will not build on the sand, but on the bedrock sayings of Christ, and the gates and minions of hell shall not prevail against us. Should such men as we fear? Before the whole world, aye, before the sleepy, lukewarm, faithless, namby-pamby Christian world, we will dare to trust our God, we will venture our all for Him, we will live and we will die for Him, and we will do it with His joy unspeakable singing aloud in our hearts. We will a thousand times sooner die trusting only in our God than live trusting in man. And when we come to this position the battle is already won, and the end of the glorious campaign in sight. We will have the real Holiness of God, not the sickly stuff of talk and dainty words and pretty thoughts; we will have a Masculine Holiness, one of daring faith and works for Jesus Christ."

That's what we're after. Suffering is worth it to show the supremacy of Christ to the nations, and suffering is worth it to experience the satisfaction of Christ for all eternity. We are going to see tonight, "Rejoice in suffering...", "Rejoice in suffering...", "Rejoice in suffering..." I pray that we would walk away tonight, 50,000 of us, saying, *"Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen,"* (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). That together we would say with Paul in Romans 8, *"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us...For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into*



the freedom and glory of the children of God.” We know this verse. It goes on further and says,

*“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. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. 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. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

Let’s go out of here, tonight, saying that! Okay, are you ready?

## **SEVENTY-FIVE KEY TEXTS**

### **A Biblical Theology of Evil and Suffering**

#### **The Pentateuch**

##### **1. Genesis 1-11: Essential Foundations**

###### **The Nature of God...**

Here we go, seventy-five key texts, a biblical theology of evil and suffering, starting with the Pentateuch. First five books of the Old Testament. Number 1, Genesis 1-11: Essential foundations that undergird everything else we see about suffering in the Bible. We’ll start with the nature of God. He is the supreme Creator. God is transcendent, over and above and beyond all of creation. He is the sovereign King, meaning that He has authority over all creation. The Author of creation has authority over creation; He has all the rights. Twenty-first century Americans don’t have rights; God has all the rights.

He is the righteous Judge who establishes His laws to govern creation. In Genesis 2, He gives that Law, and when man breaks that Law, He judges him righteously and accordingly. Yet, at the same time, He is the merciful Savior who loves and provides for His creation.

###### **The Nature of Creation...**

That’s the nature of God, the nature of creation. Everything in creation is fashioned by the Word of God. He speaks, and it is. Everything in all creation is sustained by the power of God. God holds the stars in their place. God tells the oceans where to stop and the land where to begin. The sun and moon move and plants grow and animals feed according to the power of God. Talking about Jesus, God in the flesh, Paul says, *“He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”* Also, creation is evidence of the goodness of God. God defines goodness, and everything that He makes in Genesis 1 is good.

### **The Nature of Man...**

This is the nature of creation, leading to the nature of man. Created in the image of God. *"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'" And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth,"* Genesis 1:26. What does it mean for us to be created in the image of God? It means we are a unique reflection of God. We are utterly reliant upon God, and we are ultimately responsible to God.

We have been created in the image of God, and we have been created for the purpose of God. *"And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" Man was created to enjoy a relationship with God, to experience His blessing, to rule over all creation with dominion, and to reproduce God's glory to the ends of the earth.* Multiply the image of God everywhere. This is the nature of man.

### **The Nature of Satan...**

Then, see the nature of Satan. See Isaiah's description of Satan's fall, and then John's description of Satan's future in Revelation. Significant truths, these are huge. Now, follow this: God is Creator; Satan is creature. That seems obvious, but it's so important. Satan is not the supreme Creator; he is a part of creation. He is on our side of the Creator/creature divide, which means that God is sovereign; Satan is subordinate. God is in control; Satan is controlled. This is not dualism; this is domination! God and Satan are not two equal forces battling against one another. Satan is a creature who is accountable to God, under the sovereign control of God.

Do not forget this: on every page of Scripture, Satan is never in control. When we get to Job tonight, Satan is not in control. When Joseph is sold into slavery, Satan is not in control. When we get to the evil kings in Israel's history, Satan is not in control. When evil religious leaders and Roman officials sentence Jesus to death and crucify Him on a cross, Satan is not in control. God is in control of the whole thing. When Christians are advancing the gospel to the nations and being killed in the process as we see in the book of Acts, Satan is not in control, and when we get to the end of the Bible, and we see the cosmic battle for the souls of men and women throughout history, Satan will not be in control then. God is in control, and Satan is subordinate to Him in every page of the Bible and on every page of human history.

Now, a couple of significant characteristics about Satan. He can speak and he is smart. He is not a fool. Satan is crafty and cunning and knows where/how to attack. He is a malicious liar and an evil murderer. He takes God's Word, and he twists it, Genesis 3:4. He is the father of lies, John 8:44, and a murderer from the beginning.

### **The Nature of Sin...**

That leads us to the nature of sin. As we read Genesis 3, we think about Romans 5, *"Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned..."* The events of Genesis 3 have affected every single one of our lives tonight. All sin and all suffering in the world, in all of our lives, goes back to the root of one sin in Genesis 3. So think about the core of sin here. There, sin involves rejecting God's Word. This is what Adam and Eve were doing. They were spurning God's authority. "We can eat whatever fruit we want; God's not sovereign over us." And they were denying God's character, His goodness and His wisdom and His power.

Then, see the conflict brought about by sin. Conflict between man and God. Guilt before God, Genesis 3:7. Shame: hiding from God, Genesis 3:8, and fear of God, Genesis 3:9-10. Sin created conflict between man and God, and sin created conflict between man and woman. Husband and wife, the most intimate of all human relationships, marred by conflict and marked by pain and sorrow and suffering. In addition, sin created conflict between man and creation, leading to toil and trouble in the world. Conflict between man and creation.

Ultimately, see the consequences of sin. On one hand, you have immediate spiritual death. Man cast out of the favorable presence of God, Genesis 3:22-24. Cursed, and the effects of the curse became evident quickly. Murder in Genesis 4. Evil hearts in Genesis 8. "*For the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth,*" Genesis 8:21 says. Corrupt minds in Genesis 6:5. Violence in Genesis 6:13. Division in Genesis 11:8-9. The curse of sin upon men and women.

Immediate spiritual death, and eventual physical death. The ultimate payment for sin was death. So, Adam lived 930 years, and then he died. You read Genesis 5, and you just see a haunting refrain over and over and over again... "he died," "and he died," "and he died," "and he died." Do you see the effect of sin from the start of Scripture? From sin came suffering and death.

### **The Need for Redemption...**

Which led, from the very beginning of Scripture, to the need for redemption. Oh, don't miss this. The Bible could have ended in Genesis 11. God would be completely just and completely righteous and completely good to end the story there. There is no reason why we should have any other chapters, and it would be completely right for God to leave man in our guilt, in our shame, in our fear. God is infinitely holy. Man has rebelled against Him; we have rebelled against Him, and if we desire justice of any kind, then that would mean punishment of death upon ourselves and separation from our Creator for all of eternity, and God would be completely right to do exactly that.

But praise God, Genesis 1-11 also gives us glimpses of grace. Genesis 3:15, the promise of Christ. The one who would come from woman, and in the process of being bruised by the serpent, He would crush the head of the serpent. The divine promise in the third chapter of the Bible that one day, Satan will be trampled, and Christ will triumph over sin and death. See the promise of Christ and the presence of a covenant. God, in Genesis 6, after the flood, enters into relationship with creation through Noah, promising not to bring that kind of judgment upon the earth again.

Genesis 1-11 gives us glimpses of grace, and Genesis 1-11 leaves us holding onto hope, that one day Satan will be defeated, and one day sin will be destroyed. One day, God's creation will be restored. God's people will be rescued, and one day God's name will be praised. This is the hope that drives the rest of the Bible, and in the end, this hope centers around Christ. From this point forward, the Bible is a story of redemption that spans from creation, in Genesis 1-2, to re-creation in Revelation 21-22. Bookends of the Bible, and the story in between is redemption, and that redemption is only possible through a Redeemer, which means that the rest of this story, from beginning to end, revolves around Jesus Himself. Keep that in mind.

## 2. Genesis 37-50: Pain and Providence

### The Portraits of Joseph...

Second text, and I promise they won't all be as long as these first couple, but these are just foundational texts for everything else. Okay, Genesis 37-50: pain and providence in the life of Joseph. Genesis 37-50 gives us many portraits of Joseph. He is the favorite son of his father, and as a result, he is the despised brother. His brothers take him, at first plot to kill him, but then decide to sell him as a slave; the slave in a foreign land. Egypt, to be more specific. There, we see him as the pure servant, resisting sin and temptation, running from Potiphar's wife when she tries to seduce him.

As a result, she is shamed, and she accuses Joseph of a crime against her, and Joseph becomes the slandered prisoner, stuck in jail for thirteen years. However, through a series of shady characters Joseph meets there, God delivers him from prison, and he becomes the leader over all the land, exalted in Pharaoh's house, the organizer and ruler over the distribution of food amid famine. Joseph's family comes looking for food, and Joseph becomes the restorative brother, forgiving his brothers for what they had done to him, and using the resources of Egypt at his disposal to provide for them. Thus, he becomes the reunited son with his father Jacob at the end of the story.

### The Providence of God...

Now, this whole story is given to us in Scripture to show us the providence of God amidst evil and suffering. In all of Joseph's ups and downs, temptations and trials, we see God as the ever-present Lord. We see God present with Joseph in Potiphar's house, and present with Joseph in Potiphar's prison. Amid his suffering, Joseph was never alone.

God is the ever-present Lord, and God is the ever-subtle King over suffering. The ever-subtle King. When Joseph reveals himself to his brothers when they come looking for food, we as readers are expecting Joseph to let them have it for what they had done to him, but listen to what Joseph says...this is astounding...listen to this, Genesis 45:4,

*"So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt.'"*

Did you hear that? Who sent Joseph to Egypt, the brothers or God? God through the brothers. These are unexplainable friends: divine sovereignty. God is the one who sent Joseph to Egypt as a slave; God did that. Joseph makes that clear: God did this. At the same time, the brothers are the ones who sold him into slavery, human responsibility. They sold him, right? They did that.

So see the ultimate conclusion here: the responsibility of man cannot be ignored. These brothers were responsible for the evil action of selling their brother into slavery and then lying about it. They sinned, and they were responsible. At the same time, the will of God

cannot be thwarted. God was doing the whole thing. God designed Joseph being sold into slavery; God did that.

He is the ever-subtle King, and showing Himself, third, as the ever-faithful Savior. Why did God design this? Because God keeps His promises to His people. Listen to what God told Abraham way back in Genesis 15, *"Then the LORD said to Abram, 'Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there...'"*

That's exactly what God is doing here. It's exactly what He told Abraham He would do...sending His people to Egypt. God keeps His promises, and God preserves His people. Oh, don't miss this. After the fall in Genesis 3, we fast forward to the table of nations in Genesis 10, and there are 70 nations scattered as a result of the tower of Babel. Everything in disarray, but then in Genesis 12, right after the nations scattered in rebellion against God, we see God calling out Abraham, and forming a nation, a people for Himself.

All of this story leads to the end of Genesis where...check this out...Genesis 46:27, *"All the persons of the house of Jacob who came into Egypt were seventy."* The number of nations described in Genesis 10 is 70, and the number of descendants of Israel is 70, and Deuteronomy 32:8 says, *"When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God."*

So, the story of Genesis begins with the people of God, Adam and Eve, dwelling safely and prosperously in the land of Eden. All of that is destroyed by the fall, but by the end of Genesis, because of all that has happened in this Joseph story, we see a new people of God, the people of Israel, dwelling safely in the prosperous land of Egypt. God preserving a people for Himself.

### **The Point for Us...**

Now, the point of all this for us is this: particularly when we walk through suffering, and we wonder, "God, what are you doing in my life?" just like Joseph did. "I'm following you, trusting you. Why have I been sold into slavery? I stood firm in purity, why I am in prison for years?" When you and I ask those kinds of questions like this, "Why is this happening?" remember this: we have a Lord who is with us. The same God whose presence was with Joseph in the pit from which he was sold, and the house in which he served, in the prison in which he was thrown, before the Pharaoh to whom he was summoned...that same God is with you, brother or sister. God is with you in your exaltation. When things are going great, God is with you. Also, God is with you in your humiliation. When things are at their worst, when nothing's going right, when you think you are alone, you are never, ever alone.

We have a Lord who is with us, and we have a King who is guiding us. We learn in Genesis 37-50 that God is the ever-subtle King, and don't miss what this means in our lives. God does not overlook some of the details in your life. Do you ever wonder if He is? "Has He missed this? Is God not aware of some of the things that are going on around me right now?" We start to think that God doesn't care, or that God is not involved in some of the details of our lives, and this is where I want to remind you, brothers and sisters, God orchestrates all of the details of your life. Again, not in a way that you or others are not responsible for choices made, or in a way that is some kind of robotic control; that is not at all what we see in this story. Instead, we are seeing a God who is working behind the scenes at every moment, every second to bring Joseph to the right place at the right time. Think of it!

He is orchestrating a variety of circumstances. You think about Joseph's life, and you could take any one of a number of incidents that happened to him, and you could write "tragedy" over all for them. However, when you put them all together, you see a beautiful picture of what God was doing. Think about Joseph in prison. He tells the cupbearer what his dream means, and then he says, "Please don't forget me." Then, the cupbearer forgets him. Well, praise God he forgot Joseph, so that just at the right time, when Pharaoh needs a dream interpreted, the cupbearer who had forgotten about Joseph just happens to be standing there at that moment, and says, "I know a guy who can help you out with that." You don't plan that!

God alone can orchestrate that. He is orchestrating a variety of circumstances in a variety of people. Do you not realize that our lives are not the only ones that God is working in? Your life is not the only life that God is working in. Who could imagine that the world does not revolve around you or me? To go back to the cupbearer deal; the reality is that the only reason the cupbearer was in prison, if you look at the story, is he had apparently done something very minor that had upset Pharaoh. So, God used a bad mood one day in Pharaoh's life to send a cupbearer to prison so he could have a dream one night, look confused the next morning, only to see Joseph walk by at that very moment. This is God orchestrating all of this!

So realize this...realize this: when you or I ask, "God, what are you doing in my life?" the answer may just involve what God is doing in somebody else's life, and what God is doing in your life may be an integral part of what God is doing in their life and vice versa. God is orchestrating a variety of circumstances in a variety of people for a variety of goals. God is bringing Joseph to a point of humility and joy and gladness. God is bringing Jacob's sons to a point of confession. God is bringing Jacob himself to a point of fulfillment, and for God's people...this is the point of Genesis 50:20...all of these goals are ultimately good.

Based on that reality, I want to remind you of a truth we are going to see throughout Scripture: God's providence is the only foundation for embracing life's pain. There are a lot of people today...even some who claim to be Christians...who say that God is not sovereign over every detail, that God is not in control, and God does not know what is going to happen in the future. I want you to see what a hollow worldview that is. Imagine Joseph with that worldview, thinking of himself as a victim of hopeless chance. His brothers sell him off, he's thrown into prison, and God is with him, but what does that really matter? If God couldn't keep him from being thrown in there, then there's no guarantee he'll ever get out. God is unsure of how this story is going to end, and so Joseph would have no reason to hope in any kind of better future. "We'll just see what happens." That's his hope, but no, that's not what Joseph is holding on to, because Joseph knows the providence of God, and Joseph knows that God is orchestrating all these details toward a good and glorious purpose, even the worst details.

So after years in slavery...13 years in a dungeon...he doesn't go off and slander Potiphar's wife when he gets out; he doesn't bring down the cupbearer who for years had forgotten him, and when he sees his brothers, he doesn't condemn them for selling him into slavery. No, instead, he says, "Come near to me and listen. God did all of this; God sent me here; God led me here; God's in control." Think about it, brothers and sisters, whether it's a malignant tumor or an unexpected miscarriage or a sudden/tragic loss, know this: God is in control.

What that means is that He takes evil and turns it into good. Think of it! Even the wicked words and actions of sinful men who want nothing but to harm you, God will ultimately use for good. God takes evil and turns it into good, and God takes suffering and turns it into

satisfaction. Listen to Genesis 41:50, when Joseph has two sons; listen to what he names them. "Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh. 'For,' he said, 'God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house.' The name of the second he called Ephraim, 'For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.'"

Memorize verse 52: "God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction." This is not just surviving in suffering, this is thriving in suffering, and it's a theme we see all over Scripture. God's saving victory for His people often comes through pain and hardship, which leads to the last truth that God might lodge in our hearts from this story. How do we know that God will take evil and turn it into good? How do we know that God takes suffering and turns it into satisfaction? Some of you are in the middle of deep pain and hurt right now, and you're wondering, "How can I really know that God is going to make me fruitful in the land of my affliction?"

The reason you can know that is because we have a Savior who will redeem us. Don't miss the parallels in this story here. God uses a dreadful sin to preserve His people in Genesis. God uses sons who wanted to kill their brother, who sold their brother into slavery. Can you imagine the horror of this sin? Selling your own brother as a slave to foreign travelers, but God used it to preserve His people, setting the stage for one day...follow this...everything in history points to Good Friday, right? This story in Genesis 37-50 sets the stage for the day when God will use a dreadful sin to save His people for all eternity; when God would use the sins of those who falsely accused and slandered Jesus and sentenced Him to death and nailing Him to a cross...God would use their dreadful murderous sin to save His people forever.

Think about this...think about this...in both stories, God takes the sins of the destroyers and makes them the means of their deliverance. God used the brothers' sin to deliver the brothers, and in the same beautiful, indescribable way, God used the sin of men who nailed Jesus to a cross...think of it...in their committing that sin, and us with them, they were actually making the way to be forgiven of our sins. Think about these brothers, standing before the brother they had offended, and he weeps and he says to them, "Come close. Because of your sin against me, I am now able to save you." It's the same thing that we see in the gospel. We stand before Jesus, our Savior we have offended, and He says to us, "Come close. Because of your sin against me, I am now able to save you."

Don't miss the promise. All throughout this story, there is an interplay between Joseph and his brother Judah. It was Judah's idea to sell Joseph into slavery instead of leaving him to die. Judah insisted the brothers come back to Joseph a second time, and in the end, as a result of what God had done through Joseph, it was Judah who led the people of God into the land, and there Jacob blessed his son, Judah, saying,

*"Your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples,"* (Genesis 49:8-10).

Now, it is Judah to whom his father's sons will bow down. It is Judah that will be the lion. It is Judah that will have rulers come from his line...the ruler's staff...which is the sign of a king, and it is Judah that will one day have a King, capitol "K" king, from his line to whom shall be the obedience of all the peoples. The point of the story is ultimately to preserve the

line of Judah, for one day God will take the Lion of Judah and make him the Lamb who was slain.

This promise in Genesis 49:8-10 is ultimately fulfilled in the end, when in Revelation 5, John hears:

*"Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.' And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth."*

Oh, don't miss the point of this story. Ultimately, Joseph is in Scripture to point us to Jesus. Think about all these portraits of Joseph, and then think about the portrait of Jesus. The favorite son came to earth and was despised by his brothers, his fellow men. He humbled himself and became a slave in a foreign land. Pure and righteous in every way, He was slandered and sentenced to death. God did this. God did this. He ordained the sinful murder of His only Son so that He might be raised to become Lord over all the land, and through His suffering, He is able restore His brothers who had sinned against Him, i.e. you and me, only to be reunited with His Father. The parallels are not perfect and the details are not exact, but the purpose of the story of Joseph is to point us to the supremacy of Jesus, and to give us hope.

Oh, brothers and sisters, hold onto this hope based on the end of this story in Joseph's life. With Joseph's brothers all surrounding him and enjoying the land, know this: there is coming a day when we will be completely restored to Jesus our Savior, where we will join Him and the Father in a land where there is no more sorrow and no more suffering and no more sin and no more pain, and knowing this...knowing that, be confident that God is going to use every circumstance, every occurrence, every detail, no matter what it is in your life...He is providentially going to use it to bring about the day when we will join with Him in His presence for all of eternity. In this grand story of redemption, the one who has saved us from our sins will one day glorify us with Him. Pain and providence.

### **3. Exodus 3: The Lord Who Sees Our Suffering**

#### **God's Revelation Amidst Suffering...**

Third text: the Lord who sees our suffering. A proper perspective of suffering is dependent upon a proper perspective of God, and Exodus 3 is one of the clearest revelations of who God is, and it comes to His people in the midst of suffering. So, we need to think deeply about the identity of God, when God revealed Himself to His people in the midst of suffering as the "great I AM." A.W. Tozer said:

"It is not a cheerful thought that millions of us who live in a land of Bibles, who belong to churches and labor to promote the Christian religion, may yet pass our whole life on this earth without once having thought or tried to think seriously about the being of God. Few of us have let our hearts gaze in wonder at the I AM, the self-existent Self back of which no creature can think. Such thoughts are too painful for us. We prefer to think where it will do more good – about how to build a better mousetrap, for instance, or how to make two blades of grass grow where one grew before. And for this we are now



paying a too heavy price in the secularization of our religion and the decay of our inner lives."

So see God's revelation amidst suffering in Exodus 3. God's people were suffering now as slaves in Egypt, and God came to Moses, the man whom God had chosen to deliver His people out Egypt, and God made known to Moses that He is holy. In the midst of suffering, God says, "I am holy. The place where you are standing, the burning bush, is on holy ground." For God to be holy means that He is perfectly unique. He is completely separate, and He is absolutely pure. God says, "I am holy, and I am merciful."

God says, "I have seen the affliction of my people. I have heard their cries, and I have come down to deliver them." God sees our affliction. He hears our cries. He knows our sufferings, and He remembers His covenant. This is what God had promised. Remember Genesis 15, "*Then the LORD said to Abram, 'Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.'*" You are not forgotten by your God! He sees you, He knows you, He hears your hurts, and He remembers His great love toward you. He does not...He never forgets His people...ever.

I am holy, I am merciful, and I am ever-present. Over and over and over again, in the patriarchs, God would tell them, "I will be with you." Now, He comes to Moses, and He says, "Go to Pharaoh, and bring my people out of Egypt." Now put yourself in Moses' bare feet for a minute here. You're a shepherd in the field, and you're supposed to go to the most powerful ruler in the land and say, "Let all your slaves go to me." So, Moses says, "Who am I that I should do this?" I love how God responds. Notice what God doesn't do. He doesn't say, "Well, bro, you were trained in Pharaoh's court, you've learned a bunch of good lessons out here in the wilderness, you're Egyptian enough to confront the Egyptians and Hebrew enough to love the Hebrews...you're the best shot we've got."

No. God says, "I will be with you." He says, "I am all-powerful." He turns Moses' staff into a snake, and He promises to take water from the Nile and turn it into blood. God can do whatever He wants. He is all-powerful. God says, "I am self-existent." He has no origin. When God says, "I am who I am," He is pointing to the fact that He has always been. God does not owe His existence to anyone or anything else. He was not created. He was not brought into being. He has always been.

I am self-sufficient. God has no needs. He does not need anything from you or from me or from anything else. I love Psalm 50, in the middle of that passage, "*For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine.*"

Tozer said:

"Were all human beings suddenly to become blind, still the sun would shine by day and the stars by night, for these owe nothing to the millions who benefit from their light. So, were every man on earth to become an atheist, it could not affect God in any way. He is what He is in Himself without regard to any other. To believe in Him adds nothing to His perfections; to doubt Him takes nothing away."

God says, "I am eternal." God has no beginning, no end, no past, no future, "*from everlasting to everlasting,*" He is God. Like the burning bush, God never runs out of fuel. His glory never dims, and His beauty never fades.

Do you realize that for all of eternity, we will be continually discovering more and more and more of the glory and the beauty of our God? We will never tire of gazing upon and delighting in and enjoying His glory, because His glory is eternal. Stephen Charnock, in his *Discourse on the Eternity of God*, said,

"When we enjoy God, we enjoy him in his eternity without any flux...After many ages, the joys will be as savory and satisfying as if they had been but that moment first tasted by our hungry appetites. When the glory of the Lord shall rise upon you, it shall be so far from ever setting, that after millions of years are expired, as numerous as the sands on the seashore, the sun, in the light of whose countenance you shall live, shall be as bright as at the first appearance; he will be so far from ceasing to flow, that he will flow as strong, as full, as at the first communication of himself in glory to the creature. God is always vigorous and flourishing; a pure act of life, sparkling new and fresh rays of life and light to the creature, flourishing with a perpetual spring, and contenting the most capacious desire; forming your interest, pleasure, and satisfaction; with an infinite variety, without any change or succession; he will have variety to increase delights, and eternity to perpetuate them; this will be the fruit of the enjoyment of an infinite and eternal God."

I wish I could write something like that! That's good. God says, "I am eternal; I am immutable. Unchangeable. His perfections never change. God cannot change for better or for worse. Now, obviously, it is good that God can't become worse, but it is also good that God can't become better. For if He could become better, then that would mean He was not infinitely good in the first place, and He is.

He says, "I am faithful. You read Exodus 6, and it's filled with promise after promise after promise. "I will do this..." "I will do that..." "I will do this..." He promises liberation, redemption, adoption, and possession of the Promised Land. God is saying, "I will show myself faithful to my promises. I will show myself faithful."

He is sovereign. Right after this, Moses faces resistance from the people of Israel, and he is going to face resistance over and over and over again, but you look at Exodus 3:19-20, and you see the sovereignty of God. God says, "*I know the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go.*" That's a guarantee. "Moses, he will let you go." How does God know that? How does God ensure that? Because He is sovereign, brothers and sisters. God is not making up this thing as He goes along and hoping it turns out all right for His people. He is accomplishing the purpose that He has set out from the beginning of the Bible.

He is sovereign; He is just. At the end of Exodus 3, God talks about how the Israelites are going to plunder the Egyptians, and the Israelites are going to leave Egypt with all kinds of wealth and treasure. Don't miss the picture here. In a situation where the Israelites are being unfairly, unjustly treated as slaves year after year after year, there is coming a day, the Lord says, when justice will be exacted. We must be careful not to evaluate God's justice in the short-term. God will assert His justice ultimately and completely in His perfect time.

"I am holy; I am merciful; I am ever-present; I am all-powerful, self-existent, self-sufficient, eternal, immutable, faithful, sovereign, and just, all of this leading to the bold and clear claim: I, Yahweh, the Lord, I am God, and there is no other god besides me."

### **Our Response Amidst Suffering...**

So, how shall we respond to this revelation amidst suffering? Put your faith and hope in God. Ladies and gentlemen, no one and nothing else is worthy of your trust and your hope. This became the steadfast confession of the people of God in the Old Testament: God is the Lord, Deuteronomy 6:4-5. However, this is not the end of the story. The stunning realization of the New Testament is that Jesus is the Lord. In John 8, Jesus refers to Himself as the "I AM."

Put your faith and hope in God, in Christ, and find your rest and refuge in God. Think about the ramifications, the implications of these truths. No matter what happens to you in this world, God is all of these things, and the God who is sovereign and immutable and eternal and self-existent and all-powerful, is the God who sees your affliction, who hears your cries, and who knows your sufferings.

So the practical encouragement for us in suffering is clear: do not focus on the circumstances that are difficult around you. Put your focus on the character of the one who called you. Over a dozen times in the book of Exodus, God simply says to Moses or to His people, "I am the Lord." "I am the Lord." The most important thing we can have...hear this...the most important thing we can have as we walk through difficult times in this life, confusing times in this life...the most important thing we can have is a deep understanding and knowledge of who God is. When there is trouble in the family, and we don't know how to solve it, God says, "I am the Lord." When a relationship is broken, and it doesn't seem like it's going to mend, God says, "I am the Lord." When nothing seems to go right, and it's not certain how things are going to come out, God says, "I am the Lord." When you're lying on a hospital bed, and you don't know how much longer you have, God says, "I am the Lord." His revelation amidst suffering.

## **4. Exodus 12-24: Blood That Saves from Suffering and Sin**

### **God delivers His children from suffering through blood.**

Okay, let's do one more. Exodus 12-24: blood that saves from suffering and sin. This is the story of how God, then, saves His people from their suffering in Egypt and then enters into a covenant relationship with them. Three main truths I want to highlight. Number one, God delivers His children from suffering through blood. Okay? After sending nine plagues in Egypt, the tenth plague is the plague on the firstborn. He promises to strike down the firstborn son in every household in Egypt, including the Israelites. The only exception will be any Israelite family that takes a lamb into the home and sacrifices it, and then puts its blood over the doorpost to the home, that sacrifice will be a substitute. Death won't happen in the home if there is the blood of a sacrifice over the doorpost. So, that's the whole picture. God saves His people, delivers His people from suffering through blood.

So see the portrait of the Lord here in Egypt. He is the holy Judge. Judging sinners. Man deserves destruction, guilty in sin, deserving of death. At the same time, see the Lord as the loving Savior. He is giving grace, providing a way for people to escape His wrath that is due sin, and the provision from the Lord in Egypt was the blood of a spotless lamb. By grace, this sacrifice would be acceptable to God, and through faith, this sacrifice was applied

to man. Those Israelites who were trusting in the blood of the lamb to keep them safe, on that night, God delivered them out by the blood, under the banner of the blood.

### **God guarantees His children His love through blood.**

Second truth we see, a few chapters later, God guarantees His children His love through blood. In Exodus 24, God gives His people His law, and He enters into a covenant with them, basically, like inaugurating a marriage relationship with them. God is committing Himself to the people of Israel.

See the significance of God's law in Exodus 20, where He gives them the Ten Commandments, and then see the beauty of God's mercy, because the people of God were not able to keep the law of God, so God provided a way for them to be forgiven of their sin through blood. God's people would be forgiven by the blood of a sacrifice, and then, you look back up in Exodus 24, and Moses sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice all over the people as a sign that God was binding Himself in covenant with them. So, God's people are covered by the blood of a sacrifice, and once that happens, Exodus 24 says they gaze upon His glory, and they celebrate in His presence. Deity and humanity meeting together in communion on a cosmic mountain; it is an awesome scene, and it's all made possible by the slaughter of a sacrifice...by blood.

### **God saves His children from sin through blood.**

Now, why do we have this story? To help us understand how God, ultimately, saves His children from sin through blood. You look from the beginning of the Bible all the way to the end, and you see that this whole sacrificial system was set up to help us understand how God would send His very own Son to suffer, to shed His blood to save us from our sin and deliver us from eternal suffering.

I've listed all kinds of verses here, pointing us to the reality that the blood of the Lamb of God would satisfy the wrath of God. God's wrath due sin and sinners would be poured out on Jesus instead of you and me, and the blood of the Lamb of God would save the children of God by taking away our sin. By grace, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is acceptable to God, and through faith, His sacrifice is applied to us. To all who trust in the blood of Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away our sin, to all who hide under the banner of His blood, you will be safe from the judgment you are due and brought into relationship with God, where we now gaze upon His glory, and we now celebrate in His presence. That's what the Lord's Supper is all about, Matthew 26. Remember this: Jesus suffers, sheds His blood, to deliver us from suffering everlasting.

## **5. Leviticus and Numbers: The Law, the Land, and Suffering**

### **God is holy.**

Next, I've put Leviticus and Numbers together under the heading of: the Law, the land, and suffering. God is holy. The infamous statement in Leviticus 11:44, "*Be holy, for I am holy.*" From this, we learn that we cannot be casual with God. Like Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, who were struck dead for offering unauthorized fire before the Lord, we must be contrite before God. God is holy, sin is deadly. I put one example here, Leviticus 24, where a man blasphemed/cursed the name of God, and he was stoned to death as a result.

### **Sin is deadly.**

Sin is serious, and it's evident all throughout Leviticus and Numbers that the propensity to sin in man is strong. The people of God stand at Kadesh-barnea in Numbers 13-14, with the

Promised Land sitting right in front of them for them to take, and God's people disregarded His goodness. God's people doubted His greatness. They magnified potential problems and minimized powerful promises. God had given promises to Abraham at that spot in Genesis 13 and 15, in that land, and now, in the place, they had finally come to the land of promise, and they say, "We can't trust God."

God's people disobeyed His Word. "Let's choose a leader and go back to Egypt." And in the process, God's people disqualified themselves from His blessing, and because of their sin, they increased their suffering. The propensity to sin in man is strong, and the punishment for sin is severe. God, help us to recover a sense of the severity of sin in our day. Cornelius Plantinga, in a classic called *Not The Way It's Supposed To Be*, said,

"The awareness of sin, a deep awareness of disobedience, and painful confession of sin used to be our shadow. Christians hated sin. They feared it, they fled from it, they grieved over it. Some of our [forefathers] agonized over their sins. A man who lost his temper might wonder if he could still go to holy communion. A woman who for years envied her more attractive and intelligent sister might wonder if this sin threatened her very salvation...That shadow has dimmed. Nowadays the accusation, 'You have sinned,' is often said with a grin and with a tone that signals an inside joke. At one time this accusation still had the power to jolt people."

### **Sacrifice is necessary.**

God, help us to realize how deadly sin is...any sin. No matter how small we may think it is. Leviticus and Numbers are showing us that God is holy, sin is deadly, and therefore, once again, sacrifice is necessary. That's what the first 16 chapters of Leviticus are all about, leading to God's primary provision in the Old Testament: an annual sacrifice on the Day of Atonement.

Here are the elements that He set up: a priest would enter an earthly sanctuary, as described here in Leviticus 16, offer a sacrifice: the blood of a spotless animal. He would sprinkle the blood over the altar to show that the penalty of sin, death, had been paid. Though God saw the sins of Israel, God was satisfied by the sacrifice of a substitute, much like we saw in Exodus 12. Then, the priest would take another animal, confess the sins of the people over it, and send it away into the wilderness, never to be seen again, and that was a sacrifice that would need repeating every year.

As a result, the effect was that this sacrifice of an animal was an annual reminder of all our sin. This is how Hebrews 10 describes the Day of Atonement. Look at the end of that passage, "*But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*" Now, that is so important because it sets the stage for God's provision in the New Testament: an abiding sacrifice in the death of Christ with parallel elements: a priest entering a heavenly sanctuary, but this priest is Jesus. The author of Hebrews says, "*For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.*"

The offering was not the blood of an animal, but the blood of a sinless man, Jesus, so that though God sees the sins of our lives, He is satisfied by the sacrifice of His Son. That is a sacrifice that will last forever, Hebrews 10:11-14 says. Oh, see the effect of His sacrifice: the removal of all our sin. "*I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more,*" (Hebrews 10:17).

### **Jesus is worthy.**

Don't miss the point: sin brings suffering, and we need a Savior to bring salvation, and He is worthy. Jesus is the High Priest who will continually represent us before God, Hebrews 7, and He is the Sacrificial Lamb who will eternally reign over us, Revelation 5. He will continually represent us before God, and He will eternally reign over us, Revelation 5.

## **6. Deuteronomy: The God Who Afflicts His People**

### **Old Testament: Blessings and Curses**

Last one, Deuteronomy: the God who afflicts His people. This is an interesting perspective...it's really quick, but it's an interesting perspective on suffering in the Old Testament involving blessings and curses. In Deuteronomy, which is the recounting of God's law before His people finally enter the Promised Land, God promises blessings for obedience, Deuteronomy 28. At the same time, right after this, God pronounces curses for disobedience. God says these words in Deuteronomy 28:58,

*"If you are not careful to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, the LORD your God, then the LORD will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions, afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting. And he will bring upon you again all the diseases of Egypt, of which you were afraid, and they shall cling to you. Every sickness also and every affliction that is not recorded in the book of this law, the LORD will bring upon you, until you are destroyed. Whereas you were as numerous as the stars of heaven, you shall be left few in number, because you did not obey the voice of the LORD your God. And as the LORD took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so the LORD will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you. And you shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to take possession of it."*

You will not see those verses on greeting cards at the Christian bookstore! So, God tells His people that He will bring afflictions to them when they disobey Him. That, in so many ways, is the story of the rest of the Old Testament. God's people disobeying His law over and over and over again.

### **New Testament: The Cross and the Curse**

Which leads us to the New Testament where you see the cross and the curse. Galatians 3, written to people who were thinking that they could obey the law of God and earn the favor of God, Paul says, *"For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.'"*

We are under the curse of God's law, and when Jesus went to the cross, He came under the curse of God's judgment. Back up there in Galatians 3, Paul says that Jesus became a curse for us, and he alludes to Deuteronomy 21:23. There is a great quote there from Luther, and as a result of Him taking the curse that we deserve, we now stand within the grasp of God's grace, and we've got three options, ladies and gentlemen. We can ignore the curse and pretend like we are okay before God. We can work to overcome the curse. We can follow religious rules and regulations, thinking that we are earning the favor of God...pray this prayer, go to church, be a good person, you'll be okay in the end. Both of these options are damning.

What is our third option? We can embrace the curse, i.e., we can acknowledge the disobedience at the core of our hearts, and we can run to the cross. Trust in Christ, and experience His blessing. In His justice, God afflicts His people with suffering for their sin, and in an astounding act of mercy, God afflicts His Son with suffering to take away our sin.

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