



## SEVENTY-FIVE KEY TEXTS A Biblical Theology of Evil and Suffering

### Historical Books

#### 7. Joshua and Judges: Fear and Judgment

##### Exhortation Amidst Fear

Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. What do these books teach us about suffering? See in Joshua and Judges: a picture of fear and judgment. From the beginning of Joshua, an exhortation amidst fear. Joshua is preparing to lead the people into the Promised Land. In his fear, God speaks to him and tells him to trust divine promises. *"The LORD your God will lay the fear of you and the dread of you on all the land that you shall tread, as he promised you,"* (Deuteronomy 11:24-25). God had given them the land; God had guaranteed them the land. It was theirs to take. So, God said, "Take it!"

Follow divine commands. Joshua 1, *"This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth..."* God's Word must be on our minds; God's Word must be in our mouths. Depend on divine presence. I love Joshua 1. From the perspective of the world, Joshua should be scared to death, but with the presence of God, Joshua could be sure of victory. Don't be afraid.

Live for divine glory. *"Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD,"* (Joshua 24:14-15). Part of the point of the book of Joshua is to show us that God orchestrates the events of His people for the display of His glory. God sometimes puts His people in difficult circumstances that elicit fear in the world in order to demonstrate His power, His faithfulness to His promises, and His supreme glory.

##### Demonstration of Judgment

Exhortation amidst fear and demonstration of judgment. Joshua and Judges both make clear that God judges individuals. I put Joshua 6 and 7 here, the story of Achan, an Israelite soldier who kept some of the plunder from war that God had said not to keep, and we learn that one individual's sin harms the entire people of God. The very next thing after that, because of Achan, this one individual's sin, the next battle was lost and thirty-six Israelites died at the hands of a much smaller army.

One individual's sin forfeits the favorable presence of God. God had said over and over again, "I will be with you", but you get down to Joshua 7:12, and God says, *"I will be with you no more, unless you destroy the devoted things from among you."* One individual's sin forfeits the favorable presence of God, one individual's sin brings dishonor on the glory of God, Joshua 7:9, and one individual's sin warrants the swift and just wrath of God. When it's discovered what Achan had done, Achan and his entire family were stoned.

God judges individuals. Do not underestimate the effect of one sin bringing about suffering. God judges pagan nations. God had pronounced curses on pagan nations in Deuteronomy

20, and as we see these nations, we realize that, for some time, God demonstrates His patience toward undeserving sinners. That's what we see Him promising in Genesis 15. God was delaying His wrath toward the nations until the appointed time.

God is patient. Ezekiel 33 says He has *"no pleasure in the death of the wicked,"* but calls them to turn and live, but when they do not, in due time, God doles out His judgment on deserving sinners. Much like we saw in Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18, we see God judging pagan nations all over the book of Joshua and Judges, and we also see God judging His people when they disobey Him.

The entire book of Judges involves a pattern that starts with relapse. God's people turn from His commandments, which leads to ruin. They experience judgment, which then leads to repentance. They turn from their sin, and God forgives them. That leads to restoration, and then rest, but then it starts all over again, and the problem is that God's people were illustrating man's depravity/sinfulness. See the core of their sin: blatant idolatry. *"The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the LORD and did not serve him,"* (Judges 10:6).

The consequence of their sin, idolatry, was rampant immorality. Some of the most wicked, heinous stories in all the Bible happen in the book of Judges...Judges 19 being one of them. Indescribable evil and wickedness, all because they had turned from God. James Montgomery Boice said, "No people ever rise higher than their idea of God, and conversely, a loss of the sense of God's high and awesome character always involves a loss of a people's moral values and even what we commonly call humanity."

They illustrated man's depravity, and they needed God's deliverance. More specifically, they needed a deliverer. They needed God's deliverance. They needed someone to rescue them from divine judgment. They needed someone to show them divine mercy, and that's how the book of Judges ends: with the people of God doing what was right in their own eyes, utterly wicked and desperately in need of ultimate deliverance; in need of someone to show them divine mercy.

## **8. Ruth: The Sovereign Mystery of Surprising Mercy**

### **The Setting...**

Now, in the middle of this time period spanning the period of Joshua and Judges, we have the story of Ruth. One of my favorite books in the Bible: the sovereign mystery of surprising mercy. So, here's the setting, two places: a land of promise. Bethlehem, known as the "house of bread." Then, you had a land of compromise, Moab. The land that a man Elimelech takes his family to when there is famine in Bethlehem. Moab was a cursed land. The origin of the Moabites went back to the time when Lot had an incestuous relationship with his daughter in Genesis 19. The Moabites were an outcast people who worshipped foreign gods. Moabite women had seduced Jewish men into sexual immorality and adultery, and that led to the killing of 24,000 Israelites. So, you have Moab, a land of compromise.

The story revolves around two people: a woman with honest hurt, Naomi, the wife of Elimelech. When she and her husband and her two sons got to Moab, her sons married Moabite/cursed women, and then her two sons and her husband died, and Naomi was left with two Moabite daughters-in-law and nothing else to her name. Neither of her daughters-

in-law have had children that could provide for their family in the days ahead. So, their names were destined to die with themselves.

So, when Naomi decides to come back to Bethlehem, and she gets there, she says to the people when they say, "Hey, Naomi.", she says, "Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara, which means bitter, because God has dealt bitterly with me. He has brought calamity upon me." Do you ever feel like that? Do you ever feel like the providence of God has been hard on you? You wonder if you can't take it anymore. A woman with honest hurt, and beside her on the return is Ruth: a woman with humble devotion who commits to stay with Naomi and follow Naomi's God.

Now, as they come to Bethlehem, they have two primary points of need: they were in need of food, and they were in need of family. They had no one to provide for them.

Now, behind all of this, in the first chapter of the book of Ruth, we see two pictures of God. We see that God is great. Naomi calls God "the Almighty." Naomi knows that God is all-powerful. At the same time, we see in Ruth 1, that God is good. The first glimmer of hope in the book is Ruth 1:6, where we find that the Lord, Yahweh, has provided food for His people in Bethlehem.

So, we know that even behind the scenes of Naomi's bitterness, God is great and God is good, and we see this one promise from the start of the book. Mark it down, Ruth 1: in God's sovereign design, He ordains sorrowful tragedy to set the stage for surprising triumph. There are times when we think that God is far from us. In this story and in every one of our lives when we are surrounded by famine, when we long for what we don't have or what we know we need, when everything seems foreign. Maybe you find yourself in a new place physically, emotionally, relationally, or spiritually. You're not sure how you got there, but this isn't what you had planned.

When death strikes, and the pain just won't seem to go away. Maybe it was a short time ago, maybe it was a long time ago, maybe it was expected, maybe it wasn't. When despair sinks in, when we're not sure we really want to go on in our current circumstances. When we feel like there's no way out. Amidst loneliness when no one else, even those who love you, really seem to understand. Or maybe when it feels like there is not anyone that is there to love you. Amidst barrenness. Oh, the pain that I know many couples struggle with. Wanting children, desiring children, wanting a family, and struggling to understand why God would give you such a strong desire, and yet, leave it unfulfilled. In our grief, when we hurt, when we cry, when we wrestle, and in our shame. When the things we struggle with that we may not be proud of. There might be things you are struggling with that either people don't understand, or maybe other people even look down upon.

In all these things...and I don't want to be overly depressing here...but these things are real. When we get the diagnosis from the doctor, or we sign the papers ending a marriage, or we hear the news in our family, or when our job is gone or the house is taken away or the bottom line can no longer be met anymore...whatever it is, and we wonder, "Is God really near in all of this?"

This is where we must realize, that even when we think that God is farthest from us, here is the promise: God will show Himself faithful to us. There is a delicate touch of hope at the end of this chapter in Ruth 1:22. Naomi and Ruth the Moabitess "*came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.*" Naomi has no idea what that is about to mean. She is saying, "I am empty," but here's the reality: standing next to her in the person of Ruth is fullness from God, and God is about to weave together the story of all stories to show His gracious

and unfathomable blessing toward Naomi, and He's going to do it through Ruth the Moabitess! Don't miss this, brother or sister: when God seems farthest from you, He actually may be laying the foundations for the greatest display of His faithfulness to you.

This is why we named our daughter, whom we adopted from China a couple of months ago, Mara Ruth. This is Heather and I's story. We had been waiting for children for years, God had not been providing the way we wanted; we were wondering why not? Who knew that God, in withholding a child from us, was setting the stage for our first son to be from Kazakhstan, and then our second son, and now our daughter from China? I look around my table, and I see the blessing of God in a way I never could have imagined eight years ago in the middle of hurt and pain and tearful nights with my wife, and it's our little girl's story. Abandoned at birth, left outside the gate of an orphanage in a brown paper box. What looked like tragedy, God was setting the stage for surprising triumph, to bring her into a family that would love her and care for and point her to the love of God the Father on high.

### **The Redeemer...**

So, back to Ruth. The stage was thus set for the redeemer to come on the scene in Ruth 2, the portrait of a kinsman-redeemer. One morning, Ruth goes out in search of food, and she just so happens to come into the field of Boaz. The knight in shining armor enters the scene. She starts to glean with other beggars in his field, and just as she's doing that, Ruth 2 says, Boaz walks up. Guys, I don't know if watched a romantic movie with your wife; one of those love story movies where things start happening that are so unrealistic, and they're coming together, and you're thinking, "This is absurd; life never happens this way." Right when you're about to say something sarcastic, you look over at your wife next to you, and she's in tears; she's engrossed in the romance, and you think, "You're buying this? Give me a break!" That's never happened to me, I've just heard from other guys.

However, when you come to Ruth 2, you see the sovereign hand of God directing this man to this woman. He walks onto the scene and says, "Who is that?" That's Hebrew for, "Check her out!" As Boaz finds out who she is and that she has no family to take care of her, he starts to seek her as his own family. He seeks the outcast as his family. He tells her to stay in his field to glean there as much as she wants. She will be safe in his care.

He shelters the weak under his wings. Then, in a wonderful scene, He serves the hungry at his table. He serves the hungry. Boaz invites Ruth to sit with his guests for a meal, and the romance is just dripping here. *"Come here and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine." So she sat beside the reapers, and he passed to her roasted grain. And she ate until she was satisfied...*" (Ruth 2:14). It's good. Then, he showers the needy with his grace. I'm just trying to make it interesting for those of you who Secret Church is a date night tonight. Making sure that she goes home with as much as possible. She is, literally, covered with food for weeks.

Now, when she gets back, Naomi finds out whose field Ruth has been in in Ruth 2, and she is ecstatic, because she knows Boaz is a kinsman-redeemer. I've used that language, but what is a kinsman-redeemer? God had set up a law where a kinsman would take care of a relative's family if something happened to his relative. If someone died, then the next kinsman could redeem/purchase/acquire everything that belonged to that person including their family, and part of the purpose of this was to make sure that people in the family were cared for. Naomi knows that Ruth has just been treated to a feast by a kinsman-redeemer. So, she goes from bitterness to blessedness real quick. Could it be that even in your sorrow and your suffering, God is actually plotting for your satisfaction?

So, Naomi springs into action in Ruth 3, becomes a matchmaker, and tries to set Ruth and Boaz up, and long story short, after a shady night on the threshing floor in Ruth 3, it is discovered that there is one other kinsman who is closer than Boaz who has the right to redeem, and this is where we need to understand the price of a kinsman-redeemer. In order for a kinsman redeemer to redeem family or property, he had to have three things. One, he must have the right to redeem. He must be a near relative. Two, he must have the resources to redeem. He had to be able to pay the price, and third, he must have the resolve to redeem.

So, in Ruth 4, Boaz confronts this other dude, and he doesn't have the resolve to redeem Naomi and Ruth, so in Ruth 4:9-10, Boaz buys everything that belongs to Elimelech, and as a part of this, he brings Ruth the Moabite to be his wife. They get married, and then they have a son named Obed, which brings us to the resolution of the whole story.

### **The Resolution...**

Let me show you Obed in redemptive history. You read Ruth 4.

*So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him." Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. Now these are the generations of Perez..."*

All the way down to David.

Now, see the picture here. God brings His people from death to life. The book of Ruth opens with three funerals and closes with a wedding and a baby. Death has given way to life in the hands of the Almighty. God brings His people from curse to blessing. Ruth 1, Naomi had the curse of all curses: a widow with no heir. Ruth 4, she holds the heir in her hands as the women call out blessing on her. God brings His people from bitterness to happiness. Can you just see the smile on Naomi's face here as she looks down at Obed? "Don't call me bitter anymore; call me blessed!"

God brings His people from emptiness to fullness. At the end of Ruth 1, Naomi opens up her hands and says to the women of Bethlehem, "I have nothing." At the end of Ruth 4, she folds up her arms around a precious little baby as the women of Bethlehem say, "You have everything." God brings His people from despair to hope, and the book of Ruth ends not looking back at an unbearable past, but looking forward into an unbelievable future. This is where we're reminded that this story doesn't end in Ruth 4.

Fast forward with me to Matthew 1. I want to show you the next time we see Ruth and Boaz in the Bible. Matthew 1:6, "...and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king." Leading, ten verses later, to "and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ." Oh, the story of Ruth is ultimately pointing us to Jesus in redemptive history. He is our Redeemer; He alone is able to pay the price for our salvation. He alone is able to guarantee the promise of our restoration. "In him we have redemption through his blood..." (Ephesians 1:7-8).

## **The Conclusion...**

In it all, we come to these conclusions. One, God is committed to sovereignly providing for His people. He is the Almighty, Ruth 1, who is sovereign over everything. Don't lose sight of the fact that He is sovereign. He is sovereign over every setback. Famine, death, food, family, months of waiting, a nervous night, a nearer-kinsman, a childless womb, God is sovereign over it all.

God is sovereign over all suffering. We may not understand, we may wonder why, we may wonder how things will ever change, we may see little or no hope on the horizon, but know this: in every setback we face, God is ultimately plotting for our good, so that we know, even when we cannot understand His manner, we can always trust His mercy. His path to our joy is not always smooth. His path to our joy is not always straight, but ladies and gentlemen, His path to our joy is always satisfying.

I put in here a hymn here written by William Cowper. Long story short, Cowper came to know Christ in an insane asylum. He suffered through bouts with deep depression all of his life. When he came to Christ, He discovered that amidst darkness in life, when he faced the storm clouds of trial and difficulty, he discovered that these same storm clouds in the end rained down showers of mercy and grace. Listen to what he wrote in this hymn called "God Moves in a Mysterious Way":

God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants his footsteps in the sea,  
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines  
Of never failing skill,  
He treasures up his bright designs  
And works his sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,  
The clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy, and shall break  
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the lord by feeble sense,  
But trust him for his grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.

His purpose will ripen fast,  
Unfolding every hour;  
The bud may have bitter taste,  
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,  
And scan his work in vain:  
God is his own interpreter,  
And He will make it plain.

Ruth: the sovereign mystery of surprising mercy.

## 9. 1 Samuel 17: Our Champion in Battle

### Three Facets of This Story...

On to 1 Samuel 17: our champion in battle. This is a story that is, likely, familiar to many of you...David and Goliath...we'll go through it quickly, but just think how it relates to our understanding of suffering. Remember three facets of this story: an invincible character, an impossible challenge, an improbable champion. So, you think about the improbable champion; He was passionate for the glory of God and confident in the power of God. So, impossible challenge, improbable champion, passionate for the glory of God, confident in the power of God.

### Three Levels to This Story...

Now, if we aren't careful, we will just look at this story on its base level and miss the point. Three levels of the story I want you to see. First, on the level of individual history, just like we mentioned, this story involves a character: Goliath, a challenge: defeat the giant, and a champion: David the soon-to-be king. Right before David comes in 1 Samuel 17, in 1 Samuel 16, David was anointed by Samuel as the next king.

So, you've got individual history going on here, but take it up a notch and you also have national history. This is not just a story about David and Goliath; this is a story about the Israelites and the Philistines, God's people and their enemies. The character: surrounding nations, the challenge: deliver God's people, and the champion that God raises up for His people is David, the shepherd king.

But, then, take it up another level. It's kind of like Google Earth right here. Now to a broad level. The grand scheme of redemptive history, this battle depicts a much fiercer character: Satan, and a much greater challenge: destroy sin, and in it all, a surprising champion: Jesus the Savior King. Without question, part of the purpose, if not the purpose, of the story of David and Goliath is to show how God raises up an improbable champion from the family of Jesse to ultimately deliver His people from their enemies.

### Three Takeaways from This Story...

So, what does all of this have to do with suffering? Three takeaways: one, we must live with passion for God's glory. The point of the story is not to be brave in the face of giants; the point of the story is to be passionate about the glory of God in every problem we face. No matter what it is...family, work, personal life...more than we want our problems to go away, we want God's name to be glorified. If that means the problem remains, then so be it. Our passion is not, ultimately, for safety, security, comfort, our plans; our passion is your glory. In the problems that every one of us is facing, let's pray that God would show His glory in them. In every problem we face, and in every place we go.

Second, we can live with confidence in His power. I remind you, brothers and sisters, that the ultimate battle has already been fought, and it has been won. Our improbable champion, a baby born in a manger, later crucified on a cross has *"disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him,"* (Colossians 2:13-15). Satan has been defeated, and what this means is that in our battles with sin and suffering in this life, we do not fight for victory. Victory has been won. We fight from victory, and that's a huge difference.

So, let this truth seep into your mind, because if this is not clear in your mind, you will not experience much victory in your life. You will be confused and defeated in suffering, Christian, if you don't let this lodge deeply in your heart. You will miss out on being on the

front lines of mission because you will be shirking back. When we fight, we are not trying to win. Those who are in Christ have won, and our lives here are enforcing the victory that has already been secured. *"He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world,"* (1 John 4:4).

As a result, we will look to Jesus as our champion in every temptation and sin we encounter and in every trial and struggle we experience. We have no reason to fear.

## **10. Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles: Sin and Suffering**

### **The Seriousness of Sin in the Kings of Israel...**

I want to group the rest of 1 and 2 Samuel, as well as 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles together around the theme of sin and suffering. See the seriousness of sin in the kings of Israel. Now, this is David, unfortunately, in a different light. See sin's anatomy in what led to adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah. See how sin appears so subtly in that story, and it harms so deeply, and it controls so quickly, and sin devastates so painfully. How did this happen in David, the king after God's own heart? Sin's anatomy.

Sin's tragedy involves the defiance of God. David says in Psalm 51, *"Against you, you only, have I sinned..."* Sin involves the defiance of God and the distress of men. The sins of the kings of Israel dominate the rest of Israel's history in the Old Testament.

### **The History of Suffering in the People of Israel...**

Consider the history of suffering in the people of Israel flowing from David to Solomon and then to king after king after king after that. Remember covenant chronology here. There was a United Kingdom in 1 Kings 1-11. Saul, David, Solomon, but then, after Solomon, the kingdom was divided into the Northern kingdom, Southern kingdom. Northern kingdom: Israel; Southern kingdom: Judah, until the day when the Northern kingdom was destroyed, and then the Southern kingdom was taken captive.

Now, in the midst of all that, look at covenant loyalty. None of the 19 Northern kings followed the Lord. Eight of the 20 Southern kings followed the Lord. The overwhelming majority of Israel's kings rebelled against God, leading to mammoth suffering among God's people. Covenant catastrophe: division, slaughter, destruction of Samaria in the Northern kingdom by Assyria, and finally, the fall of Jerusalem in the Southern kingdom to Babylon. Sin appears subtly, harms deeply, controls quickly, and devastates painfully. Sin always brings suffering. We're going to see this over and over again: God, help us to learn that sin always brings suffering.

## **11. Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther: The God Who Preserves His People**

### **The Plot...**

Yet God is merciful. Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther: the God who preserves His people. These books recount God's preservation and eventual restoration of His people back in Jerusalem after they experienced exile and suffering. The plot that plays out here involves the return of the remnant to Jerusalem. When they get back, we see the rebuilding of the temple. That's what the book of Ezra is all about. Then, after that, we see the rebuilding of the city walls. That is what Nehemiah is all about.



### **The Point...**

So, I put the structure of these two books in your notes, and the point of all this is to show us that God will ultimately and providentially preserve His people for His glory. You look in these verses that I have listed here, and you will see God working behind the scenes in all of this through pagan kings, amidst various circumstances to preserve and restore His people in all of those passages. Even when you get to Esther, and you don't even see the name of God mentioned...even when we cannot see God, we know He is still present, and He is still working. In the book of Ezra, the people of God are facing potential annihilation and extermination, and you see all these people mentioned, but God is never mentioned by name.

Yet, it's clear that God raised up Esther for such a time as this to preserve God's people in the face of potential obliteration. These were not easy times for the people of God; these were extremely trying times for the people of God, but in the end of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, it is clear that, even, or especially, when we suffer, God is still worthy. One of my favorite scenes is Nehemiah 12. When the people of God had started work on the walls, and before that, they were being mocked by the nations around them. One particular leader from outside Israel said, "If they rebuild those walls, a cat could not even walk on those walls." So, when you get to Nehemiah 12, you see all the people of God...all of them...climb on top of the walls with their instruments, and they march around on the walls, singing loudly; that's what Nehemiah 12:43 says. God will show Himself worthy through suffering.

## **Psalms and Wisdom Literature**

### **12. Job 1-2: God's Sovereignty in Suffering**

#### **The Suffering of Job...**

On to the Psalms and Wisdom Literature. One of the classic texts, obviously, on suffering is Job. It is the first book we've got here. So, I am going to split Job into four different sections and show you God's sovereignty in suffering, God's sufficiency in suffering, God's purpose in suffering, and God's power in suffering. So, let's take them one-by-one.

First, sovereignty. We're not going to read the whole story, but basically, Job, called a blameless man in the text, becomes the subject of conversation between God and Satan, and Satan tells God that Job only worships Him because Job has stuff; he has been blessed. So, God gives Satan permission to strike Job, and his possessions are destroyed one after another by foreign armies, and then his children are killed in a massive natural disaster where a house caves in on all of them, and at the end of this, *"Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.' In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong."*

So, what do we learn here about the suffering of Job is, first, that suffering is often undeserved. Now, we've been talking over and over again about how suffering in the Old Testament is often deserved; how suffering is often a direct result of sin, but that's not the kind of suffering that is depicted in Job. What's being addressed here is the seemingly unjust, unwarranted suffering that happens in life. Part of the point of the entire book of Job is to show us that sometimes suffering seems unjust. The author goes to great pains to show us that Job's suffering is in no way a connection to his character.

Now, Job was not perfect; obviously, none in Scripture but Christ was, but the picture is clear. Four terms...you look in these passages...used to describe Job: blameless, upright, feared God, shunned evil. That is the portrait we have of Job. Blameless, upright, feared God, shunned evil. The author is going to great pains to show us that this suffering came to Job, not because of particular sin in his life, but precisely because he avoided sin.

In addition, suffering is often unexpected. You don't usually wake up in the morning expecting suffering to come crashing down on you, and Job certainly didn't, but it did. It is often unexpected, and it is often unimaginable. You see the spiraling effect all the way through Job 1, and you get to the end and Job 2 just picks up more, where Satan says, "Well, you saved his skin." So, Job was afflicted with all these different boils. We don't know exactly about the physical affliction Job had, but you see all throughout the book ulcerous sores, itching, degenerative changes in facial skin, loss of appetite, depression, loss of strength, worms in the boils, running sores, difficulty in breathing, darkness under the eyes, foul breath, loss of weight, continual pain, restlessness, blackened skin, peeling skin, and fever. In his deepest nightmares, Job could not have imagined what was going on to him right now.

Suffering is often unimaginable; it has a surreal feel to it. Suffering is always painful. You look at these verses describing Job, and you realize that the Bible does not gloss over the pain of suffering. The pain of suffering is real, and please do not hear me at any point, tonight, saying that suffering is not painful and grief is not heavy and sorrow is just easy when you know God. It's not easy.

### **The Sovereignty of God...**

So, that's the suffering of Job, and in the midst of that suffering, I want to show you the sovereignty of God because God is sovereign over everything in Job 1-2. God is sovereign over angels, and God is sovereign over demons including Satan. We talked about this in Genesis 3, and you see it again: the power of Satan is always limited by the prerogative of God. Satan cannot do anything without God's permission, but the moment he has permission, he wreaks havoc on Job.

So, who is bringing suffering on Job? In a direct way, Satan is bringing suffering on Job, but in an ultimate way, God is bringing suffering on Job. Just like we saw in Joseph, God is ultimately sovereign over every single thing that happens to Job in these two chapters because Satan can't do anything outside of God's sovereignty. To put in plainly, Satan is on a leash, and God holds the reigns. God is almighty; Satan is not. God is omnipotent; Satan is not. God is omniscient; Satan is not. God is sovereign; Satan is not sovereign.

God is sovereign over nations. The Sabeans and the Chaldeans who attack Job's household. God is sovereign over nature. Fire falling from the sky and wind coming from the desert. God is sovereign over disease. When Job is inflicted with sores, it's not Satan who has ultimate power over Job's health. God does, and that's where we realize that God is sovereign over death. Job likely thinks in Job 2 that he has, maybe, a terminal disease that he is not likely going to be able to survive from, but Satan is not sovereign over whether or not Job lives or dies. God is sovereign over whether or not Job lives or dies. Satan does not decide when you or I live or die. God does that. If God wills, we live, James 4:15 says. If God doesn't will, we die.

God is sovereign over death, not Satan. God is sovereign over comfort. God is attributed with the blessings of Job in the beginning of Job 1 and God is sovereign over calamity. Look at Job 2:9-10. "*Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?*" See it: God is ultimately sovereign, not only over Job's blessings, but over his suffering. This is huge to

understand. God is not in charge of Job's blessings while Satan is in charge of Job's sufferings. That's not the picture here. Satan is in charge of nothing; God is sovereign over everything.

### **God's Sovereignty in Our Suffering...**

So, where does that leave us? Bring it together; three key conclusions from the start of the book about God's sovereignty in our suffering. One, God's sovereign design for our lives on this earth includes suffering. Now, I put the word "design" there because God is not just allowing suffering to happen here. It's actually a part of His design. God designs suffering. Who initiated suffering in Job's life, Satan or God? God did! He says to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job?", and Job knows that what has happened is in God's design! Did you hear what he said in 1:21? "*The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away.*" Who takes away all of these things? Satan? No, God took them away. Now, we've already seen that these tragedies were directly the work of Satan, but Satan's work was ultimately under the sovereign design of God. So, God's sovereign design for our lives on this earth includes suffering.

Second conclusion: the sovereignty of God is the only foundation for praise in the middle of pain, just like we saw in Joseph! It's what Job said in 1:20. After all this happened, Job gets up, tears his robe, and shaved his head and falls to the ground in worship. How do you praise God in the middle of pain like that? That's a tough question. How do you say, "*Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.*" Job reached into the depth of his being and the only foundation for praise he found was the sovereignty of God.

Which begs the question, "How is God's sovereignty a foundation for praise?" Some would say, "Well, if God is sovereign, why do I still have cancer?" "Why did this person still have to die?" "What good is it if He's sovereign if I die anyway, or they died anyway, or if I still have this pain?", and here's where I want you to see the implications of God's sovereignty. Follow this: God's sovereignty assures us that He is in control. When you or I are suffering, it will not bring much comfort to you to think that Satan is in control. Yet that's exactly what many people try to comfort themselves with. "Certainly, God's not in control of that." What would be the other option? Is that actually comforting to you? I want to plead with you, brothers and sisters, not to go there because God is all-powerful, and He is all-good, and amidst all the things we don't know in the midst of suffering, this we do know: He is God, and He is in control.

Consider the implications of this. If God is in control, then that means that at every moment in our suffering, God is with us. Job knows that in the misery of his soul, he is not alone. That's why Job wrestles throughout the rest of the book; he knows God is with him, and...this is key...he knows that at every moment in our suffering, God is for us. Job says, "*The LORD gave.*" The covenant name of God; the name that expresses His faithfulness toward His people. I long for you to see this tonight in your suffering. God not only has 100% control over everything that is happening in your suffering; He is not only 100% with you, but, child of God, He is 100% for you. He's not 99.9% for you. Christ, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the majestic and mighty one over all the universe is 100% for you.

So, why does God's sovereignty lead to praise? His sovereignty assures us that God is in control; His sovereignty reminds us that Satan has been conquered. Part of the point of the book of Job is to flat out humiliate Satan and to showcase his lack of power. After Job 2, he is silent for the rest of the book. God's sovereignty guarantees us that one day our suffering will conclude. If things are out of control, brothers and sisters, then what guarantee do we

have of how they will end up, but because things are in God's control, we have an absolute guarantee of how they are going to end up?

Which leads to the third conclusion from this first part of Job: ultimately, our pain on earth can only be rightly understood from the sovereign perspective of heaven. This is huge. This book is all about discovering the mysteries of the sovereignty of God, but I want you to notice how the story is told here: Job is at no point let in on the conversation that has taken place in heaven. As a result, the only perspective that he has is the one from the middle of the darkness that surrounds him. You and I have a whole other perspective, right? We have a birds-eye view of this story. We have a different perspective that helps us understand all that is happening in Job. We know that this is actually an honor for Job. We know the end from the beginning, and Job will eventually be restored, but Job doesn't know any of this, and that is part of the point of the book of Job.

Whenever we walk through suffering, we have a limited perspective, every one of us. Now, I'm not saying that anytime we suffer, it is because of some conversation between God and Satan that they are having about our lives like we see here in Job, but the reality is, no matter what happens in our suffering, our perspective will always be an earthly one, and we will see pain in that level. The point of Job here is that the sovereignty of God is to remind us that there is a whole other perspective. It's the perspective of the God who is with us and for us, a God who is wise and loving toward His people, a God who has full reign over any and everything in our lives. "So, why is this happening to me?" we ask. The answer may not be found on this earth. Mysteries of this earth are ultimately attributable to matters of heaven.

Just imagine the picture here...a heavenly perspective picture of Job's suffering. There stands God and Satan, with 10,000 angels looking on as Satan accuses Job of false worship and says, "God paid him to worship Him." And God responds, "You can do anything to Job, but under my sovereignty, don't take his life." Satan does. He strikes down Job's possessions and his children, and a hush comes over heaven as God, Satan, and 10,000 angels watch in silence to hear Job's response. Job looks up, and says, "*The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised*" and unbeknownst to Job, 20,000 arms in heaven shoot into the sky and 20,000 voices shout out, "Worthy is the God of Job!", and Job had no clue that was happening, and Satan ran from the presence of God. That's the perspective of heaven. So, the question for all of us is: Will we praise God when we're surrounded by the mysteries of this earth? Will we trust God with the sovereign perspective of heaven?

### **13. Job 3-31: God's Sufficiency in Suffering**

#### **Four Truths...**

That leads to the second part, Job 3-31: God's sufficiency in suffering. So, what do you do, not just when suffering strikes, but when suffering lingers for days, and months, and years? We've got victory in Job 2, but this keeps going on for days and days and days and days, and nothing is better. Everything is still gone from Job's life, and he sitting in a trash heap with oozing sores and boils all over his body.

So, see the sufficiency of God not just when suffering happens, but when suffering continues. There is Job, surrounded by three friends, and over these chapters, these three friends dialogue with Job, and I want to show you four truths that come out in those dialogues. First, when the pain of suffering persists, God is still present. This is key. When

the pain of suffering persists, and God, through a variety of ways, says, "I am with you," we want an explanation. That is natural, and it's not wrong. It's not wrong to ask God, "Why?" looking for an explanation. We're going to talk in a minute about the purpose of God in suffering...the "why" of God in suffering...but at this point, I want us to keep this question in perspective. When suffering persists, we want an explanation, but what God gives us is revelation, and that is what we need most. It's where this whole book is headed in Job 42. Our greatest need is not an explanation from God, but the presence of God revealed to us.

Now, as soon as I say that, some of you might think, "What do you mean my greatest need is presence? I'd rather have an explanation!" But would we really? Think about it this way: I broke my wrist a few years ago, and I was writhing in pain. In those moments, I don't need a doctor to come and show me the x-ray and give me the explanation for how the wrist broke and why I am hurting. I want him to give me something to help with the pain at that moment. I think about it another way. I've got a lot to learn in marriage, but this thing I have learned. When my wife is going through difficult times, the thing that she needs most from me is not explanation. The thing that she needs most from me is presence, and that's the point. We do not have a God distant from us doling out philosophical explanations for why suffering exists. He's not showing us an x-ray machine and giving us medical explanations while we're writhing in pain. Instead, we have a God who is with us, who never leaves us, or forsakes us. When the pain persists and when we want answers to the "why's" of our suffering, instead of giving us an explanation, He gives us what is infinitely better; He gives us Himself.

When the pain of suffering persists, you are not alone. He is with you. When the gifts we enjoy are gone, God is still good. Now, that takes us back to what we saw in Job 1. Satan had challenged God, saying that He had to pay Job in order to get Job to worship Him. The only reason Job worshiped God was because of all these blessings. Take the gifts away, and Job would curse God.

Job didn't curse God, but in the chapters that unfold, his friends, they begin to give him some very bad counsel. In a nutshell, his friends tell Job that the reason he's suffering is because of some sin in his life. They've got this theology that says God blesses the righteous and afflicts the wicked. Since God has afflicted Job, then obviously, Job must be wicked. Therefore, he needs to repent, and when he does, God will restore His blessing to Job. That is the bulk of the conversation that is taking place from Job 3-31, and some of the things these friends say are good; they make some statements that are true, and said well, but it's a perfect example of how good theology distorted and twisted slightly here and there can become very bad counsel.

The theology Job's friends propose is rigid: If you follow God, if you trust God, you'll have prosperity; if you disobey God, you'll suffer, you'll not have prosperity. That is poor theology, and ladies and gentlemen, it is alive and well in contemporary Christianity. It's a false gospel that sees suffering as evidence of the displeasure of God. Now, I want to be careful here. We're not talking about the effects, the consequences of sin here. Those consequences are real in every one of our lives. We have seen how sin results in suffering. That's what we've seen, but we twist that truth when we apply it to all suffering, and that's what many have done in American prosperous Christianity. "Trust God, follow God, and you will prosper. Your prosperity will be evidence of the pleasure of God in your life, but if you lack faith in God, you will suffer, and your suffering will be evidence of the displeasure of God in your life."

I remember sitting in a house church talking to a woman in Asia who knew a little bit of English, who had a TV, who was able to watch some stuff from here, and she said, "I see

people in churches where you live, and they tell me that if I trust God, then I'll have riches, and all of these things." She said, "I come to our house church where we are meeting in secret at the risk of our lives, and we are all poor. Does this mean we don't have enough faith in God?" She asked me that. At that point, I started to get angry at all the prosperity preachers, but then I realized that this is exactly what I am a part of exporting to the world; a whole system of Christianity that looks at bigger, better, more stuff, more things, bigger houses, nicer stuff, and this is what happens when you follow God. It's not true. It's what we have exported around the world.

The true gospel sees suffering as a means to more deeply treasure God. Oh, this is a radically different way to look at Christianity in our lives, and this is what Job is learning and showing to us. He's showing Satan and the world and his friends the struggle of faith when all the gifts are gone. He's showing us how suffering is a means by which we learn to treasure God more deeply when those gifts are gone.

Think about this on a practical level. Think about what it means to treasure God regardless of His gifts. What is suffering? At the core, suffering is the taking away of things in this world that we enjoy...our reputation, our success, esteem among peers, job, money, friends, health, sight, hearing, spouse, children, family. These are things we look to for stability and security, and when these things are taken away, we suffer, but if God is our treasure...not His gifts, but God...if God is our security and our stability...not these gifts...then, when we lose one of these things, all that does is drive us deeper to the treasure we have in God. We've got one less thing...even one less good thing...to lean on instead of God.

Now, that doesn't make it easy; the pain of losing that thing, that person may be great, and the tears may be many, but the goal will be worth it because we will more deeply treasure God. God, give us this kind of Christianity that says, "Even when all the gifts are gone, you are still good. Even when my job is gone, even when the house is gone or the car is gone, even when the money's not there, health is not there, even when we can't get pregnant, even when I don't find the husband or wife I want so badly, even when the one I love is gone, even then, you are good."

Third truth: in the confusion of our circumstances, God is all-wise. Job is a part of Wisdom literature here, and you see a contrast right in the middle of the book; Job 28 between the limited wisdom of man...follow this...the limited wisdom of man. Think about it: we lack knowledge. We act unwisely, sometimes, because we don't have all the facts. We may find out something later, and we think, "Well, if I'd known that, I would have done something different."

We lack knowledge; we lack perspective. Sometimes our perspective is jaded, distorted, maybe even limited. Many times we don't perceive all the effects of a decision, or we aren't able to see it completely from another's point-of-view, and we make an unwise decision based on that, and sometimes, we lack experience. If we've been through a situation before, we ought to be able to make wise decisions. If we've not been through a situation before, not experienced it, we have been known to make unwise decisions. So, we are limited in those areas.

Now, you think about God. You think about the unlimited wisdom of God. He has perfect knowledge. He has all the facts. He never finds something out later and says, "Oh, I didn't realize that; I would have done something different if I'd have known that." That never happens with God. God has eternal perspective, unlimited perspective. He not only sees things now, but He knows things in eternity past and in eternity future that will be affected

by this. That's why God encourages us to trust Him in the dark. He has infinite experience. He is not a rookie when it comes to wisdom. His experience is infinite.

So, consider the sufficiency of God's wisdom in your trials. In the depth of what you and I go through, in the midst of all your questions...and we have valid questions...but the reality is, we lack knowledge; we lack perspective, and we lack experience, and God looks at us and says, "Trust me." How can you trust Him? Here's how: You can trust Him when you know that His knowledge is perfect; He knows all things, and He knows what is best in all things. You can trust Him when you know that His perspective is eternal; He sees all things and their effect on all peoples for all of eternity, and you can trust Him because you know He has infinite experience, and He knows what He is doing, and He is going to do it right every time. That is the wisdom of God, and it is a rock in suffering. With perfect knowledge, eternal perspective, infinite experience, God always, always, always does what is best; He always gives what is best. I won't pretend to say that this is easy, but it is a bedrock truth.

Tozer said: "With the goodness of God to desire our highest welfare, the wisdom of God to plan it, and the power of God to achieve it, what do we lack?" God is infinitely wise, and we are not, and it honors Him when we trust Him, even if we don't understand what He is doing. This is the sufficiency of God: In the confusion of our circumstances, God is all-wise.

Fourth truth: In the depth of our despair, God is our hope. So, Job cries out: "*Oh that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book! Oh that with an iron pen and lead they were engraved in the rock forever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!*" (Job 19:23-27). In the depth of his despair, Job cries out, "There is hope! I have a Redeemer, and in the end, in my flesh, I will see Him with my own eyes." Know this: for every man, woman, boy and girl who trusts in God in the middle of suffering: He will heal our bodies, and we will see His face. The sufficiency of God in suffering.

## **14. Job 32-37: God's Purpose in Suffering**

### **Significant Foundations...**

Leading to God's purpose in suffering. Job has now debated with his three friends, and enter another guy. We have Elihu coming on the scene. Now, Elihu speaks to Job, and we really begin to get an answer to the question, "Why?" What is the purpose in suffering here? Basically, what Elihu says are three significant foundations. One, God has a purpose. God is not arbitrary, Elihu says in Job 36. Things don't just happen haphazardly. God has a purpose. God's purpose is sometimes different. You look at Job 37:11-13, he talks about rain. "*He loads the thick cloud with moisture; the clouds scatter his lightning. They turn around and around by his guidance, to accomplish all that he commands them on the face of the habitable world. Whether for correction or for his land or for love...*" So, there are three reasons why God sends rain. Sometimes for correction, sometimes out of love, sometimes for the land. So, His purpose is sometimes different, and His purpose is always good. He is just and righteous in all that He does.

### **Various Purposes for Which God Uses Suffering...**

So, with those foundations, see these purposes that come out here in these chapters for which God uses suffering. God uses suffering to refine our faith. God uses suffering to turn us aside...turn man aside from his deed to conceal our pride. God uses suffering to bring a man's soul back from the pit. God refines, restores, saves, and works in suffering for our good. To go back to the Emergency Room with a broken wrist. With all due respect to those who are in the medical profession, we all know that when a doctor wants to snap a bone back in place, we don't have very pleasant thoughts about that doctor, but we know, even if it's painful, it will be for good.

God uses suffering to refine our faith. God uses suffering to reveal His glory. Job feels like God has been silent, and Elihu says, "God is speaking. Look at how God reveals Himself." God reveals Himself in creation, Job 36. God reveals Himself in creation. God reveals Himself through His Word. God is not silent. Do you ever feel like God is silent in your suffering? He is speaking in creation, through His Word, and God reveals Himself in our pain, Job 33:19-26. C.S. Lewis said in *The Problem of Pain*: "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."

So what does God reveal about Himself? Job learns that God reveals that He is just; God is just, Job 34:10-12. God is merciful, Job 36:15-16. God is great. Just, merciful, great. The picture here is clear. Justice, mercy, greatness, and when we go through suffering, we have a deeper realization of His character.

As we wrestle with God's revelation of Himself in suffering, we need to avoid these extremes: Number one, declaring our innocence. So, we've already talked about how it wasn't a specific sin in Job's life that caused this to come about. At the same time, Elihu points out that he is still a sinner, and we need to be careful in the midst of suffering, not to see ourselves as completely innocent. Second, distrusting God's justice. Throughout the book, Job at numerous points, basically, calls God to court, summoning God to show if He is really just, and Elihu says, "God is completely just." We have to be careful when we see injustice in our world, in our lives...when we wonder why certain things are happening, not to go in Scripture where God has not allowed us to go, distrusting His very character.

We need to avoid missing His mercy. Many times, in the midst of all the bad things, we turn a deaf ear to the evidences of God's mercy. God is revealing Himself all over to us in suffering, but we need to avoid minimizing His greatness, which we have already talked about. God uses suffering to refine our faith, to reveal His glory, third, God uses suffering to teach us to rely on Him. This is the whole point of Job 34:13-15. Our every breath comes from God. So, ultimately, when we get the diagnosis from the doctor on this or that, we remember no matter what the doctors say, or what the odds of survival are, or what the chances of recovery are, the reality is our destiny is not dependent on doctors or odds or chances of recovery; our destiny is dependent on God and God alone. Suffering is designed by God to teach us to rely on Him for our every breath.

God uses suffering to bring us to repent of and renounce all sin in our lives. Now, again, this is not suffering due to a direct sin in Job's life. We saw in Romans 5 that all this suffering came originally from one sin in the world. All suffering, although not attributable to any particular sin in your life, is attributable to the presence of sin in the world. So, when we see suffering in our lives...part of the purpose of cancer is to cause us to hate sin all the more, because sin is what brought about all the suffering that is in the world. So, if we walk through cancer, still toying with sin like we were before cancer, we have missed part of God's design in cancer. We walk through grief and pain and hardship, and we still love sin, and we still indulge in sin like we did before, we've missed part of the point. Suffering is



intended to drive us to hate sin and all of its effects. Repent and renounce all sin in our lives.

God uses suffering to lead us to our reward in Him. The whole book is headed to the point where Job sees God in all of His glory. There is great hope in the purpose of God in our suffering. I remember talking in my first semester teaching seminary...I remember talking to a student in my class. She was a single woman whose husband had died in a tragic hunting accident. He was on a canoe out in the middle of a lake hunting, and her husband stood up at the wrong time, and the man behind him was shooting the gun at that time, and she had gone through that during the last year. She looked at me one day...she was sharing her story, and she looked at me, and she said, "I have experienced pain and hurt that I never could have imagined." Then she said, "It's worth it to tell what I know about God." It was just silent around the room. She had seen God as her reward in a way that she had never known before. I am not saying that is easy; I am not saying you get there overnight, but there is reward to be found in Him.

### **Possible Questions to Ask in the Middle of Suffering...**

So, we ask these questions in suffering: What areas of my faith are being refined? What is God revealing about Himself? How can I rely on God more as a result of this? What sin(s) do I need to repent of and renounce as a result of my suffering? How can that drive me to find deeper reward in God?

## **15. Job 38-42: God's Power in Suffering**

All of that leading to God's power in suffering. This is the truth about what we have already seen. What we want in our suffering is an explanation from God, but what we receive in our suffering is a revelation of God. Joni Eareckson Tada, herself paralyzed to live in a wheelchair many years ago, said,

God, like a father, doesn't just give advice. He gives himself. He becomes the husband to the grieving widow (Isaiah 54:5). He becomes the comforter to the barren woman (Isaiah 54:1). He becomes the father of the orphaned (Psalm 10:14). He becomes the bridegroom to the single person (Isaiah 62:5). He is the healer to the sick (Exodus 15:26). He is the wonderful counselor to the confused and depressed (Isaiah 9:6).

### **The Revelation of God...**

So, what does God reveal about Himself? God reveals that His power is great. He is our Creator, Job 38:4-11. He is our Sustainer. Who gives the lions and birds their food everyday? Natural selection? No. Supernatural provision! God talks about the ostrich in Job 39:13. I love this,

*"The wings of the ostrich wave proudly, but are they the pinions and plumage of love? For she leaves her eggs to the earth and lets them be warmed on the ground, forgetting that a foot may crush them and that the wild beast may trample them. She deals cruelly with her young, as if they were not hers; though her labor be in vain, yet she has no fear, because God has made her forget wisdom and given her no share in understanding."*

"The ostrich is dumb. Do you know why, Job? Because I made it dumb." This is what God is saying. He is our Creator; He is our Sustainer; He is our Savior, and God is our Friend. The

Lord, the covenant God of love, He is our friend. God's power is great; His purpose is guaranteed. "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted," Job concludes.

I love this. Think about one of the lessons of the book of Job. Satan's attempts to attack God's people only serve to accomplish God's purpose. Yes! Not only is Satan acting only within the divine permission of God, but Satan is actually helping fulfill the divine purposes of God.

God's purpose is guaranteed; His knowledge is perfect. God knows all things comprehensively. "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?" (Job 42:3). Get the picture here. God says to Job, "Job, see all that I do as Creator and Sustainer of the universe, and realize that your suffering is a mystery that is connected to 10,000 other mysteries in the world, and I know what I'm doing in every single one of them, and Job, you don't know what I'm doing. You are completely ignorant of 99.99999% of the processes going on in this world, and the last place for man to be is instructing the Creator and Sustainer of all things in how He should run the world, or worse yet condemning the Creator and Sustainer of all things for how He is running the world." Don't miss this: Instead of trying to explain everything to Job, God says, "You think this world is strange and mysterious? It's more strange and mysterious than you can even begin to imagine, and I know all of its mysteries."

God knows all things comprehensively, and He knows each of us completely. He sustains us. The details of our lives...there is not one detail in your life that is beyond the watch and care of God. He knows all things comprehensively, and He knows each of us completely. His knowledge is perfect, and His mercy is personal. Up until this point, Job's knowledge of God, even his questions about God, had been indirect and impersonal, but the conclusion Job comes to is, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes," (Job 42:5-6). When we see this revelation of God, our initial reaction is awe.

Job is silenced before God, he repents of his sin. When we see the mercy of God up close and personal, our initial reaction is awe, and our eternal response is adoration. We rejoice in our God. God's sovereignty, sufficiency, purpose and power in the book of Job.

## 16. Psalms: Songs Amidst Suffering

### Lament Amidst Suffering...

That leads us into the Psalms: songs amidst suffering. We've got songs of lament amidst suffering like Psalm 13 and others. Basically, laments usually follow a pattern: a heartfelt cry in the midst of suffering, an honest complaint before God from the depth of pain that the psalmist is experiencing. All leading to a humble confession of trust in God in the end.

### Confidence Amidst Suffering...

Other psalms express confidence amidst suffering. Psalm 27,

*"The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes, it is they who stumble and fall. Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident. One thing have I asked of the LORD,*

*that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple."*

So, get the setting here. David saw devastation, desertion, and danger all around him...all around him...devastation, desertion, danger. In light of that, what did David pray? "*One thing I have asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life.*" See what David prayed. The shock of his prayer: David doesn't ask first for deliverance. Instead, David asks first for God knowing the benefits of this request, that God is absolutely sovereign, and God is incomparably beautiful. This...God...is his soul's greatest need.

The relevance of his example for us is huge. What is our one thing? In the midst of suffering, what one thing do we need most? Is our one cry for God? Do we find God useful for our circumstances, or do we find Him glorious regardless of circumstances? That's a huge question, and see what David concluded. David concluded that confidence is found in focus on God amidst our affliction. "*Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!*" (Psalm 27).

### **Thanksgiving Amidst Suffering...**

Then see psalms of thanksgiving amidst suffering. Nestled in the heart of Psalm 119, the psalmist says, what we saw earlier, "Thank you, God. It was good for me that I was afflicted...It was good for me to be afflicted that I might learn to love your Word all the more." So, we see how suffering drives us to God's Word to learn it, believe it, obey it, and to love it. "It was good for me to be afflicted that I might learn to love your Word all the more." John Bunyan was thrown in prison for preaching the gospel, he said:

"I never had in all my life so great an inlet into the Word of God as now [in prison]. The Scriptures that I saw nothing in before are made in this place to shine upon me. Jesus Christ also was never more real and apparent than now. Here I have seen him and felt him indeed... I have seen [such things] here that I am persuaded I shall never while in this world be able to express...Being very tender of me, [God] hath not suffered me to be molested, but would with one scripture and another strengthen me against all; insomuch that I have often said, were it lawful I could pray for greater trouble for the greater comfort's sake."

Suffering drives us to God's Word, and suffering reminds us of God's goodness. Suffering reminds us that God's character is good, His Word is good, and His ways are good. See how the psalms teach us to pray amidst suffering; sometimes in lament, sometimes times in confidence, and sometimes in thanksgiving and praise.

## **17. Proverbs: Suffering and Wisdom**

### **Two Important Reminders...**

Proverbs: suffering and wisdom. The whole book of Proverbs is about wisdom.

Two important reminders from the start of the book: Wisdom is the fruit of the fear of God. "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.*" (Proverbs 9:10) Second reminder: remember that Proverbs are guidelines for living, not guarantees in life. In other words, they are not necessarily to be taken at face value as specific guarantees for every situation in life. They contain truths/guidelines for living.

### **Two General Takeaways...**

So, what do these wisdom sayings have to do with suffering? Two general takeaways: One, wisdom sometimes keeps us from suffering, and I've listed here some of the examples of that. "*Slothfulness casts into a deep sleep, and an idle person will suffer hunger,*" (Proverbs 19:15). "*Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm,*" (Proverbs 13:20). Then you have Proverbs 7, and the stern, picturesque warning from about suffering that flows from adultery. Wisdom sometimes keeps us from suffering, and wisdom always sustains us through suffering. Wisdom always sustains us through suffering. "*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths,*" (Proverbs 3:5-6). Suffering and wisdom.

## **18. Ecclesiastes: Suffering and Worldliness**

### **Understanding Ecclesiastes...**

Then, in Ecclesiastes, we see suffering and worldliness. A somewhat challenging book to understand, but one that has a lot to teach us about suffering in this world. I put a couple of reminders here to help us understand Ecclesiastes. When we read this book, we need to hear two voices in the text, okay? You've got the voice of the preacher, "*king over Israel in Jerusalem.*", and the voice of the narrator. "*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity,*" (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

At the same time, we need to understand two key ideas...two key ideas: "Vanity" and "under the sun." "Vanity" refers to meaninglessness, futility, or pointlessness, and "Under the sun" denotes life without reference to God. So, the point that the book makes over and over again is that everything is meaningless without reference to God. "*Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything,*" (Ecclesiastes 10:19). All that is meaningless without reference to God.

### **Hearing Ecclesiastes...**

When we hear Ecclesiastes in its original Old Testament context, we realize that the Preacher observes two problems: What we see "under the sun" is permanent. It persists from generation to generation...nothing new...the same old thing, and what we see "under the sun" is pointless. The preacher sees futility in the world on every level. He says wisdom is pointless, pleasure is pointless, labor/work is pointless, and life is pointless. It's all pointless, specifically when it is perceived without reference to God. Based on that, the narrator offers two conclusions: "*Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man,*" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). Fear God and keep His commandments.

Now, you bring that message into the New Testament context, and you realize: none of us can keep God's commandments because, as we've seen, all of us live under the curse of God. Our relationship with our Creator is destroyed, and our relationship with creation is distorted, and as we've seen this curse is by divine design. God has made the pursuits of this world futile; He has designed them that way to show us that there is a problem that needs to be dealt with. The curse alerts us to the problem of sin. Futility in the world alerts us to the emptiness that results from sin, and in the process, the curse points us to Jesus as the only one who can address the problem of sin.

So, Jesus redeems us from the curse of God, which we've already seen in Deuteronomy 21 and Galatians 3, and when He does, watch this: suddenly, in Christ, there is something new

"under the sun." A new birth into a new kingdom under a new covenant with new mercies going toward a new heaven and a new earth, and, in Christ, no longer is anything vanity. Christ gives meaning to that which was empty and hollow without Him. Futility and depression give way to vitality and life in Christ is the difference.

### **Applying Ecclesiastes...**

So, applying Ecclesiastes. Be warned about worldly pursuits. They will not satisfy. If you put your hope in the pleasures, possessions, people, and pursuits of this world, you will have an empty soul. Be working in the Lord. Give yourselves to God and commit your life to what lasts, and in the midst of a world that is futile without Christ, be longing for His return.

**Permissions:** You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material provided that you do not alter it in any way, use the material in its entirety, and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. For web posting, a link to the media on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by Radical.

**Please include the following statement on any distributed copy:** By David Platt. © David Platt & Radical. Website: [Radical.net](http://Radical.net)