



# God Has a Story, Too

## *Reflections on Suffering & Evil*

### **Schedule/Topics**

Jan 14 – Defining the problem, framing a solution  
Jan 21 – Suffering & evil from a non-Christian perspective  
**Jan 28 – Suffering & evil from a Christian perspective**

Feb 4 – Suffering & evil in light of the cross  
Feb 11 – Suffering & evil as a mirror  
Feb 18 – Suffering & evil does not get the final word

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### **What Scripture affirms**

1. Evil is evil. From Gen 3 to Rev 20, the Bible is clear about the reality and nature of evil. The lines are not blurred (Is 5:20).
2. God is good and so is his creation.
3. God is sovereign and everything, including suffering and evil, is used to achieve his good ends.
4. Suffering from evil is part of the Christian life (Philip 1:29-30; 2 Tim 3:12; 1 Pt 4:1).
5. Suffering and evil are temporary and come with an expiration date (Rev 21-22).

The NT puts far more weight on helping Christians respond appropriately to suffering and evil than in answering the “Why?” question.

### **Three Kinds of suffering all subject to**

*Suffering related to the Fall (cf., Rom 8:19-22)*

- No one is promised exemption from terminal illnesses, natural disasters, or birth defects (cf., Jn 9:1). Jesus implores us to recognize that moral and natural evil, in part, should drive all to repentance (see Lk 13:4-5).
- Spiritual warfare is the natural outcome of living in a universe governed by God but compromised by the evil one (Matt 6:13; Eph 6:10-20; 1 Pt 5:8-9).

*Suffering related to personal sin*

- Some suffering is related to personal sin (Jn. 5:1-14; 1 Cor 11:27-32; possibly James 5:13-16).
- AIDS contracted because of sexual promiscuity, cancer from smoking, liver disease from alcohol abuse.

*Suffering related to the purposes of God*

- All suffering ultimately brings God glory (Jn 9:3; Jn 11:4;). How?
  - ✓ God’s power to withstand temptation is displayed when we suffer (1 Cor 10:13, 2 Cor 12:9).
  - ✓ God’s justice is meted out on the wicked (Pr 16:4; Rom 9:22-23).
- God permits suffering so we can empathize with those who are undergoing similar affliction (2 Cor 1:3-7).
- The glory that God will reveal in us far outweighs any trouble we encounter in our pilgrimage here (2 Cor 4:17; Rom 8:18; Rev 21:4).
- Suffering for our faith exposes God’s patience in bringing others into his kingdom (2 Pt 3:8-10).

### **The Christian response to suffering**

God brings difficulties into our lives for a purpose (Rom 5:2-4; Jm. 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:5-7), which is achieved by our mature response. Consider James 1:2-4.

- “Joy” for James is a quiet, inner conviction and bold confidence that God is good and in control. This is not to say believers do not experience doubt, sadness, or other emotions when faced with trials (Note: James does not say “only joy” but “all joy” meaning sincere and genuine joy).
- In writing “trials of various kinds” James casts his net widely to include a variety of trials and sufferings.
- The trials are not meant to show the authenticity of faith, but to purify it by strengthening (Jm. 1:3). Muscles become stronger when repeatedly faced with resistance. Likewise, building strength through trials is the goal of trials.
- The goal is not perfection but maturity in character and Christian virtue.
- If indeed God uses all kinds of trials to deepen our maturity toward Christlikeness, then facing every trial with joy is perfectly reasonable.



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### **Suffering & Evil: A double-edged sword?**

- Though evil does repel some, it could also draw others toward God. C. S. Lewis writes:

“No doubt Pain as God’s megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead to final and unrepented rebellion. But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.

Now God, who has made us, knows what we are and that our happiness lies in Him. Yet we will not seek it in Him as long as He leaves us any other resort where it can even plausibly be looked for. While what we call ‘our own life’ remains agreeable we will not surrender it to Him. What then can God do in our interests but make our own life less agreeable to us, and take away the plausible sources of false happiness?”

— *The Problem of Pain*, pp. 95-96

- It was Friedrich Nietzsche who coined the phrase “What doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger” but that didn’t turn out to be true for him because Nietzsche went insane. Before his death, Nietzsche “collapsed into insanity” and “during the course of ... eleven years he slowly but inexorably declined” until in “his final years he was plainly aware of nothing” (*The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*). Suffering is a benefit to those who belong to Christ—it does make us stronger—but it is only misery to those who persist in rejecting him. As 2 Corinthians 7:10 puts it: “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.” (Clay Jones)
- Imagine, after cataloging his sufferings in 2 Corinthians 4, 2 Corinthians 6 and 2 Corinthians 11, the Apostle Paul saying “I couldn’t make sense of it all so I gave up!” Instead, he sees God’s point and purpose in his suffering, embracing his weakness so he might find the strength of Christ. (Don Carson)
- Therefore, every pain, every instance of suffering in this life is a redemptive moment and is not meaningless or purposeless. Suffering is God’s chosen means of instilling hope and bringing about the optimal state of all things (see Rom 5:3-5; Heb 12:1-3). (N. T. Wright)

“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 with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” — Rom 8:31-39

\*Some information here can be referenced in other sources by Clay Jones, Craig Blomberg, Eleonore Stump, N. T. Wright, Doug Moo, John Feinberg, D. A. Carson, John Wenham, Paul Helm, Doug Geivett, A. E. Wilder-Smith, Alvin Plantinga, Henri Blocher, C. Stephen Evans, Oscar Cullman, Steven Boyer and Christopher Hall.