

when we're not where we want to be, and even when our lives are not easy. In fact, these are especially the times we should call out to Him for the grace to serve Him better.

It is with this understanding that we can then say, like the apostle Paul, "Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content" (Phil. 4:11). Once we come to understand this important principle, despair and sadness can be replaced with the quiet, calm assurance that all things rest within God's sovereign control. We can then demonstrate an attitude of confidence and peace knowing that God is working out all things in our lives for our best good, whether we understand how or not. We are to simply trust Him, even when we don't understand.

Jerry Bridges expands this thought about trusting God:

Trusting God is not a matter of my feelings but of my will. I never feel like trusting God when adversity strikes, but I can choose to do so even when I don't feel like it. That act of the will, though, must be based on belief, and belief must be based on truth.

The truth we must believe is that God is sovereign. He carries out His own good purposes without ever being thwarted, and He so directs and controls all events and all actions of His creatures that they never act outside of His sovereign will. We must believe this and cling to this in the face of adversity and tragedy, if we are to glorify God by trusting Him.

I will say this next statement as gently and compassionately as I know how. Our first priority in times of adversity is to honor and glorify God by trusting Him. We tend to make our first priority the gaining of relief from our feelings of heartache or disappointment or frustration. . . .

The first thing we have to do in order to trust God is determine if God is in control; if He is sovereign over the physical area of our lives. If He is not—if illness and afflictions "just happen"—then, of course, there is no basis for trusting God. But if God is sovereign in this area, then we can trust Him without understanding all the theological issues involved in the problem of pain.⁵

The remainder of this book will look at some of the purposes of suffering. I pray that through this brief study the Holy Spirit will bless our hearts with the understanding we'll need to truly begin to "get it."



Questions for Reflection

1. Based on the verses that began this chapter, what characteristics does suffering produce? Are these characteristics you would like to possess in your life? Why or why not?
2. Apart from God, what other things do suffering people turn to for comfort? Will these things give them true, lasting comfort? What might be the consequences of looking in all the wrong places for a balm for your pain? What is the only true source of comfort?
3. Many Christians tend to respond to painful trials by saying (or thinking), "Why me?" According to this chapter, what might be a more appropriate question?
4. Is it accurate to assume that God will shield us from all adversity as long as we are obedient to His Word and live godly lives? Why or why not? Have you ever been guilty of this kind of thinking?
5. According to Jerry Bridges's quote at the end of the chapter, what should be our first priority in times of adversity? What priority do we tend toward instead? Next time you experience suffering, what will be your priority? To escape from the pain or to honor God through it all?

2

THE ORIGIN OF SUFFERING

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.

—Genesis 3:6–7

Somebody Blew It!

According to Genesis, God placed Adam and Eve in a garden; a beautiful paradise where they could dwell forever in perfect harmony with God. In this perfect, delightful world, there was no sin, no sickness, no sorrow, no suffering, and no death. As husband and wife they lived in complete unity with each other and were placed in a position of dominion over the earth and all the other creatures God had made. Everything was bliss . . . until they blew it.

God gave them one command in relation to the trees in the garden of Eden. Genesis 2:16–17 says, “And the LORD God

commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’ ”They clearly understood the command. Eve demonstrated her understanding when she clarified the serpent’s attempt to distort God’s word. He said to her, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” (Gen. 3:1). Eve immediately replied, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden’ ” (Gen. 3:2–3). She knew she could eat of the other trees, just not the one in the middle of the garden.

So she obeyed what God commanded, right? Wrong. The serpent convinced her to eat the fruit of this tree and Eve, in turn, convinced her husband to eat it. And in this act of disobedience to God’s law, the first sin was committed. Because of Adam’s sin of disobedience, where he dishonored and disregarded God’s clear command, God levied a curse on *all* mankind—every man, woman, and child who would proceed from this union of first man and woman. That curse ensured that the earth would not remain a paradise and that the fellowship of man and God would be forever ruined.

Adam had walked with God in the garden. He had enjoyed perfect fellowship with Him. There was no chasm between them until Adam’s sin. Instead of walking freely with God, they ran from Him. “And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, *and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden*” (Gen. 3:8, emphasis added). They knew they’d blown it! They knew they had disobeyed God’s command and already guilt had entered the picture. No longer did they have perfect unity with Him. *Adam’s sin, and the resulting curse God placed on Adam and all mankind brought pain, suffering, and death into the world.* That was the origin. Romans 5:12 explains, “Therefore, just as sin came into the

world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.”

It is because of that sin that we now have suffering, pain, and death. Our earth experiences chaos as well in the form of hurricanes, earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis, and so many other natural disasters. We can see this in Romans 8:19–22. “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.” No more do we have a perfect paradise. No more can we enjoy a relationship with our Father free from sin. Adam’s act of rebellion is what caused the chasm that has existed between God and man ever since. *That sin is the first of many that made it necessary to have a way across that chasm, and the only way across is through the substitutionary righteousness of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

God, the Father, made a way for His children to come to Him and to reign with Him forever. Will all men, women, and children find the way across? No. We’re told in Matthew 7:13, “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are *many*. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are *few*” (emphasis added). Are we to understand that we are to somehow find this narrow gate on our own, stumbling around until we discover it? No, not at all. God not only made provision for there to be a “gate” leading to eternal life with Him, but also enables His children to find it. Jesus tells us in John 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No *one comes to the Father except through me*” (emphasis added).

Therefore, even though man brought upon himself the dark things of this life (sickness, sin, suffering, and death), God, in His sovereign mercy, demonstrated His grace by providing salvation

for His children. Yes, He brings suffering into our lives now, but He also equips us with the tools we need to get through such suffering and persevere until the end.

Perhaps you've heard the saying, "If God brings us to it, He'll bring us through it."

To Explain It Another Way

We've already talked about the *origin* of suffering. Now let's discuss the *reasons* for it.

There are at least two main reasons that suffering exists in the world. Primarily, it exists because God decreed it. Secondly, suffering fits within God's plan for His creation. Nothing happens that is not either caused or allowed by Him. What function does it have in His plan? Ultimately, suffering exists to accomplish God's purposes.

Though it is my desire to offer comfort through a better understanding of some of the reasons behind our own suffering and grief, my ultimate goal is to glorify God's greatness in the workings of His perfect will. His thoughts are above our thoughts. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:9). The mind of God is so awesome that no one will ever be able to thoroughly comprehend the reasons for what He does. "Oh, the depth of the *riches* and *wisdom* and *knowledge* of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For *from* him and *through* him and *to* him are *all things*. *To him be glory forever*. Amen" (Rom. 11:33–36, emphasis added).

As I've mentioned above, with such a transcendent God as this, the bottom line for suffering is because God decreed it. Perhaps you remember when your parents used to say, "Because I said so!" When I was young, I told myself I'd never give that

answer to my children. I hated it when my mother said it to me. Imagine my surprise when years later I found myself telling my children “because I said so!” It wasn’t until I had children that I realized it is sometimes the most appropriate answer! I finally understood how important the concept of authority was.

Parents have a God-given authority over children. Children must recognize that authority and submit to it if order and discipline are to be maintained in the home. It gives them a model (however imperfect) of our own submission to God. When children question your authority there are times you must remind them that the bottom line for their obedience is “because I said so.” There are other times when reasoning with them may be appropriate and, in fact, advisable. But “because I said so” demonstrates who is in control. Not the child, but the parent. Not the creature but the Creator.

God is under no obligation to us for anything. He is like the artist wielding the brush, like the potter shaping the clay, like the architect drawing the design. God is the ultimate “artist” of our very being—body and soul! He can do what He wants. He doesn’t owe us any explanations! “He does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’ ” (Dan. 4:35).

In the following passage, Paul anticipates the question his readers might ask to this declaration of God’s sovereignty. “That’s not fair!” they might whine. So Paul addresses the “fairness” of the situation by telling them that God is God. He can do whatever He wants to do. And He has the power and authority to back it up! Romans 9:20–21 says, “But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will *what is molded* say to its *molder*, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use?” (emphasis added).

As Jerry Bridges writes,

God's sovereignty involves *His absolute power* to do whatever pleases Him and *His absolute control* over the actions of all His creatures. But God's sovereignty also includes *His absolute right* to do as He pleases with us. That He has chosen to redeem us and to send His Son to die for us, instead of sending us to Hell, is not due to any *obligation* toward us on His part. It is solely due to His *sovereign mercy and grace*. As He said to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Exodus 33:19). By that statement God was saying, "I am under obligation to no one"¹ (emphasis added).

Bottom line, that's the reason suffering and death exist in this world—because God said so! He decreed them to be. Suffering, hardships and death must not be interpreted as evidence of God's supposed lack of fairness. Instead, it should be regarded as His well-considered sentence against sin.

The age-old problem some people have in making sense of suffering and pain is that they may think God is either totally good but not all-powerful, or that He is all-powerful but not totally good. They have a tough time reconciling God's goodness and His power. Fortunately we are not forced to choose between the sovereignty and the goodness of God. God is both—all-powerful and totally and completely good. His sovereignty and His goodness are both asserted in the Bible with equal emphasis. References to His goodness and loving-kindness, as well as His sovereignty, appear on almost every page.

Suffering exists because it fits within God's plan for His creation. It serves to accomplish His purposes. Throughout the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, we're given examples of God using suffering or death to do just this. One such example is in Hebrews 2:14–15 where we read, "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself [Christ] likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who *through fear of death* were subject to *lifelong slavery*" (emphasis added). Christ's own