

REJOICING IN OUR SUFFERING

CLASS 2: SUFFERING AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

- Suffering is a very normal part of the Christian life.
- It can be hard to comprehend how there is suffering when God, who is good, is sovereign over everything in the world.
- In other words, *how can a good God allow such atrocities to take place right before His face?*
- It has caused many to wonder where or if God is present in the midst of their hardships.
- Combined with a lack of biblical understanding and the church's failure to teach the whole counsel of God's Word, many Christians are left trying to piece together what is going on their life.
- When we are left to our own emotions and experiences to lead, believers often times find themselves staying in the pit of despair or even worse, turning away from the God who loves them.
- Our goal in this class is to develop a proper biblical view of suffering.
- While we will most likely never know why *all* of our suffering is taking place, we can know who God is and what He desires to accomplish through our hardships.
- When we have a biblical understanding of who God is and how He works in His creation, we are then better equipped to not only direct our own hearts but the hearts of those who are suffering around us.
- The Christian should be the most joyous in the world, a beacon of hope to those who are searching and to those who are walking down the same path with them.
- **Here is the schedule for the upcoming lessons:**
 - April 27th: Introduction/A Biblical View of Suffering
 - **May 4th: Suffering and the Sovereignty of God**
 - May 11th: The Purposes for Suffering
 - May 18th: Knowing That God is With Us in Our Suffering
 - May 25th: No Class - Memorial Day Weekend
 - June 1st: Rejoicing in the Midst of Our Suffering
 - June 8th: Growing in the Midst of Our Suffering
 - June 15th: When Believers Face Tragedy
 - June 22nd: Walking With Others in Their Suffering

INTRODUCTION

- There is going to be an overlap throughout these classes regarding content. The goal is not to give new content every week, but to show how the truth is interwoven throughout various contexts.
 - For example, a Christian must learn how to suffer well both because Jesus did (and we are to follow Him) and because God ordains our suffering (and nothing from Him is evil/bad).
- One of the hardest (maybe the hardest...) truth for Christians to know, understand and accept is whether God not only allows suffering *but actually ordains (determines) it to happen*.
- The ultimate question which has plagued Christians from the seminary to the pews is *how can a good God ordain (seemingly) evil things*.
 - In other words, if God is good (and He is) how can the Bible speak of evil coming from Him? Does His goodness preclude Him from any kind of evil?
 - **Psalm 145:9** “The LORD is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works.”
 - **Psalm 107:1** “Oh give thanks to the LORD, for He is good, for His lovingkindness is everlasting.”
- This morning, we are going to discuss the so-called *problem of evil*, different theories which have been used to try and defend a good God and evil existing and then end by looking at God’s sovereignty in our suffering.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

- At the beginning of this discussion, it is important to keep two facts at the forefront of our minds:
 - **The Bible never tries to defend God or what He does or does not do.**
 - “God’s glory dominates Scripture.”¹
 - **There are no chapters or verses which clearly and plainly state the answer to evil.**
 - The Bible is not a book that tries to make this life right or comfortable.
- The problem of evil is “...a particularly troublesome matter for genuine and thoughtful Christians, sometimes called the Achilles’ heel of the Christian Faith. Why is this? Because Christianity alone among all the world’s religions and ideologies holds to a belief that God is supremely good, righteous, holy, wise, loving and powerful—the Creator, Sustainer, and Governor of *all* that exists. His perfections are infinite, unchanging and unassailable.”²
- “The problem of evil’ is one of the most discussed objections to the existence of God and is a top reason many unbelievers give for their unbelief. These objectors argue that since there are so many cases of

¹ John MacArthur, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 226.

² Scott Christensen, *Defeating Evil*, 9.

significant pain and suffering in the world that God could easily prevent, the fact that all this evil was *not* prevented means it is very unlikely (if not impossible) that God exists.”³

- The so-called “problem of evil” is an argument against the existence of God that reasons along these lines:
 - Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?
 - Then he is not omnipotent.
 - Is he able, but not willing?
 - Then he is malevolent.
 - Is he both able and willing?
 - Then whence cometh evil?
 - Is he neither able nor willing? (*From Greek philosopher Epicurus*)
- Then why call him God? ‘Evil,’ here is understood as any significant case of pain and suffering in the world, whether “moral” (evil willfully caused by human beings such as murder, adultery, theft, rape, etc.) or ‘natural’ evil (harm caused by impersonal forces of nature such as earthquakes, tornadoes, plague, etc.).”⁴
- The basic argument is that if God is good then why are there so many evil things which take place in the world. Why would someone want to worship a God who is either unloving towards His own creation or lacks the power to do anything about evil?
- Much of this issue is philosophical in nature...which simply means a love of wisdom or knowledge.

Attempts at Answering the Problem of Evil or Why Evil Exists

- The way of *theodicy* (from the Greek *theos*, “God,” and *dikaio*s, “just”; hence, a justification of the ways of God in his dealings with men) seeks to demonstrate God’s reasons for permitting evil. The idea is that by allowing evil God attains greater good than possible apart from evil.⁵
- The way of *inscrutability* argues, more modestly, that *no one knows*...that God *doesn’t* have good reason for permitting evil. We just cannot grasp God’s knowledge, the complexity of his plans, or the deep nature of the good he aims at in providence. And there is no proof that God does *not* have good reasons for allowing evil, but because he is good we can only assume that he does. Here we don’t have to come up with ‘theodicies’ to defend God against the problem of evil. Rather, the way of inscrutability shows that it is entirely to be expected that creatures like us *can’t* come up with God’s reasons, given who God is and who we are.⁶
- Some have found the *Greater Good Theodicy* mixed with *inscrutability* to be helpful in explaining evil.

³ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-problem-of-evil/>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

- A “greater good theodicy” (GGT) argues that the pain and suffering in God’s world play a necessary role in bringing about greater goods that could not be brought about otherwise. The question that remains, then, is just this: does the Bible really teach that God aims at great goods by way of various evils?⁷
 - God aims at great goods (either for mankind, or for himself, or both).
 - God often intends these great goods to come about by way of various evils.
 - God leaves created persons in the dark (in the dark about which goods are indeed his reasons for the evils, or about how the goods depend on the evils)
- There is no purpose in the universe.⁸
 - Things happen and we must just endure them.
- Two Gods exist, one is good, and the other is evil.
 - There is a cosmic struggle and sometimes the evil “one” wins.
- Fate wills that evil must exist.
 - This is when people say “things happen for a reason...”
- God gave a Free-Will to moral creatures.
 - God knew that by creating creatures with “free-will” there was going to be evil. God is not responsible for the evil, He cannot do anything about it as man is only doing as he wills.
 - In a sense, this would be God setting up the dominoes and just pushing them over.
- John Calvin said, regarding Evil’s origins:
 - . . . the Lord had declared that "everything that he had made . . . was exceedingly good" [Genesis 1:31]. Whence, then comes this wickedness to man, that he should fall away from his God? Lest we should think it comes from creation, God had put His stamp of approval on what had come forth from himself. *By his own evil intention, then, man corrupted the pure nature he had received from the Lord; and by his fall drew all his posterity with him into destruction.* Accordingly, we should contemplate the evident cause of condemnation in the corrupt nature of humanity-which is closer to us-rather than seek a hidden and utterly incomprehensible cause in God's predestination.”⁹
- Of great importance to remember, sin is not a created thing but rather is an absence of moral perfection.
- Since each person is born with this moral imperfection (the flesh), all men sin without any external force being put upon them.

⁷ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-problem-of-evil/>

⁸ The following 3 were taken from <https://medium.com/@frankbreslin41/the-romans-on-fate-and-the-gods-part-5-ed928ed3722e> and modified for this particular teaching.

⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* & 2, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 957.

- In other words, we cannot blame our sin on anyone or anything. We do not sin because of our environment, because of our genetics (unless we blame Adam), or any other cause.
 - If that were true, then we would no longer be culpable for our sin and God would not be just in punishing us for our sin.
- Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote “I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason.”¹⁰
 - Think about what this Rabbi is saying, his comfort is found in his own thinking that God is too weak to do anything about evil.
 - The best that God can do is give us a shoulder to cry on and offer no real hope or power.
 - “...with Kushner’s search for a God he can respect, he has ended up with a god who cannot help.”¹¹
- In order for Kushner’s feelings to be met, he had to make a god in his own image, one that he could properly relate to. This is very common when dealing with concepts that don’t make sense to the human mind.

Compatibilism (God’s Sovereignty and Man’s Choices)

- Simply put, this is the position (especially from those who hold to Calvinism) that God is completely and absolutely sovereign and at the same time...man is completely free to make choices which are in accordance with his nature.
- This means that man’s actions are truly his own, he is culpable for what he chooses to do. He only chooses according to his own desires. Since the natural man (the unsaved man) cannot and does not want to choose God, he can only make decisions according to his fallen nature.
- Unsaved and unregenerate man does not need to be coerced into sinning, it is what they want to freely do.
- “A biblical theodicy assumes not that man in his fallenness has the ability to obey God but rather that fallen humans in their corrupted nature choose only what serves their own pleasure and power. The following biblical principles explain how all this can be true:
 - God predetermines all events (Eph. 1:11).
 - The fall resulted in physical difficulties and catastrophes (Isa. 45:7; Rom. 8:20–22).
 - God predetermines sin but makes man accountable for his sin (Acts 2:23; 4:27–28; 14:16).
 - God hardens sinners in sin (Rom. 9:18).
 - God never tempts people to sin (James 1:13).
 - God is never blamed in Scripture for sin or portrayed as enjoying the sin he permits (Ps. 5:4).
 - God never coerces man to sin but ordains that man sin freely and thus be culpable (James 1:14–15).

¹⁰ Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, 134 (quote from *Defeating Evil*, 11).

¹¹ D.A. Carson, *How Long O Lord?* 30.

- God controls people's sin, working mysteriously through secondary causes (2 Sam. 24:1, 10; 1 Chron. 21:1).
- God is glorified in his justice when he causes calamities and judges sin (Isa. 45:5–7; Ezek. 28:22; John 9:2–5).
- God has graciously provided salvation from sin for those who believe in Christ (Rom. 3:24–26).¹²

Examples of how God can be the ultimate cause of all things (even evil) while never being the proximate or efficient cause of it:

- God's punishment of Israel by Assyria in **Isaiah 10:1-8**... God ordained the evil of the destruction of Israel by Assyria, yet Assyria meant it for evil and are thus accountable for the sin.
 - "God is able to use godless worldly powers to discipline his godless covenant people. Human oppressors don't even have to be aware of God to be useful for his purifying purpose."¹³
- God's inciting David to number the people in **2 Samuel 24:1-17**... God ordained the evil of numbering the people (see **1 Chron 21:1**) yet David was held accountable for the sin and was punished (**2 Sam 24:10, 15**)
 - "Neither God nor Satan forced David to sin, but God allowed Satan to tempt David and he chose to sin. The sin surfaced his proud heart and God dealt with him for it."¹⁴
- God's predetermined plan to crucify Christ in **Acts 2:22-23** and **Acts 4:27-28**... God predetermined it, but Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles, and the Jews were the culpable parties
 - Jesus was not crucified as an isolated event. In fact, it was the plan from the beginning.

Greater-Glory Theodicy¹⁵

- A way of addressing the problem of evil that claims that God freely chose to create a world that included the crisis of evil initiated by the fall so that he might supremely magnify his glory through the redemption that is achieved by his incarnate Son, Jesus Christ. This theodicy claims that a fallen-but-being-redeemed world is far better than an unfallen-not-needing-redemption world because such a world brings far greater glory to God. the greater-glory theodicy is a specific version of the greater-good defense.¹⁶
- It also uses suffering and evil in a way that without knowing what suffering is, what evil is, we would not know the goodness and mercy of God (among other attributes).
 - These traits of God would be unknown and unshown to us without our needing them.

¹² John MacArthur, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 225.

¹³ Ray Ortland Jr., *Isaiah*, "Preaching the Word", 106.

¹⁴ MacArthur Study Bible notes on 1 Chronicles 21:1.

¹⁵ This phrase was first used (I believe) by Scott Christensen in order to take the greater good theodicy and put its focus from man's good to God's glory as the purpose of suffering in the world.

¹⁶ Scott Christensen, *Defeating Evil*, 218.

- Christensen’s argument for a greater-glory theodicy rests on four arguments: (p. 106)
 - God’s ultimate purpose in freely creating the world is to supremely magnify his glory to his image-bearing creatures–human beings.
 - God’s glory is supremely magnified in the atoning work of Christ, which is the sole means of accomplishing redemption for human beings.
 - Redemption is unnecessary unless human beings have fallen into sin.
 - Therefore, the fall of humanity is necessary to God’s ultimate purpose in creating the world.
- In my personal estimation, this theodicy takes the focus from man (ourselves) and puts it on God. It means that God did not create mankind because He was lonely or bored or any other human reason.
- It gives mankind the ultimate purpose, glorify God (which is all throughout the Bible).

GOD HAS REVEALED HIMSELF TO US

- We can conclude some facts from the Scriptures:

God is not the author of evil.

- **James 1:13** “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone.”
 - God does not tempt anyone to do evil since there is no evil within Him.
 - “Because God is wholly and perfectly good and righteous and just, he cannot entertain even the slightest evil thought or intention.”¹⁷

God is always in control (sovereign) over all things.

- **Isaiah 45:7** “The One forming light and creating darkness, *Causing well-being and creating calamity*; I am the LORD who does all these.”
 - What is God saying through the prophet Isaiah? There is a literary device being used here...merism.
 - It is used to include everything between two contrasting words.
 - Do you see it here in Isaiah...light / darkness...well-being / calamity.
 - Then God says that He does all of these.
 - Everything that happens is from the Lord, including the calamity which comes upon you.
- **Ephesians 1:11** “...also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will...”

¹⁷ Scott Christensen, *Defeating Evil*, 65.

- **Proverbs 21:1** “The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes.”
- **Psalms 103:19** “The LORD has established His throne in the heavens, And His sovereignty rules over all.”

God does what He pleases...not what we want, or think is right.

- **Psalms 115:3** “But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.”
 - God is not a victim of circumstance.
 - He is never forced into doing something that He does not want to do.
 - Even at the one point in history where he did what in one sense was the hardest thing for God to do, “not spare his own Son” (Romans 8:32), God was free and doing what pleased him. Paul says that the self-sacrifice of Jesus in death was “a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2). The greatest sin, and the greatest death, and the hardest act of God was, in some profound way, pleasing to the Father.¹⁸
- You are not the center of God’s world. You are not the reason that God exists.
- If we truly exist to glorify God, why would that not include our suffering?

There is no evil (or good) which is going to stop God’s plans.

- **Proverbs 19:21** “Many plans are in a man's heart, But the counsel of the LORD will stand.”
- **Genesis 50:20** “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.”
- **Lamentations 3:37-38** “Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth?”
- If we truly believe that God’s is all powerful and in complete control, then there is nothing in this world (or any other world) that stands in *real* opposition to His plans.

He knows each of us and exactly what we need.

- **1 Corinthians 10:13** “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.”
- **Psalms 103:13-14** “Just as a father has compassion on his children, So the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him. For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust.”

¹⁸ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/he-does-all-that-he-pleases>

- The Lord knows you so well, He knows what you can take because He not only formed you (Ps. 139:13), He knows what you need to be conformed more into the image of Christ.
- He loves His children; He has compassion on them and is always there for them.

You are not God...you will not know all that He is doing.

- **Ecclesiastes 11:5** “Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones are formed in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things.”
- **Psalms 50:21** “These things you have done and I kept silence; You thought that I was just like you; I will reprove you and state the case in order before your eyes.”
 - To strip God of any of His attributes in order to make Him more palatable for our own thoughts is blasphemy and our thoughts should be reoriented.
- **Isaiah 55:8-9** “‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts.’”
- **John 3:8** “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”
- **John 9:1-3** “As He [Jesus] passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.’”