



# Getting to grips with suffering

PAUL KOSCIECHA



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Paul Kosciecha

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*For my wife, Anita, and all those who have helped me in the  
trials of life by pointing me to Jesus.*



# Contents

Why this book?	1
Part 1: A step into certainty	7
1. Satan on a leash	9
2. Master of the storm	15
3. Not an 'off' day	21
4. King on the ward	31
5. Every attack under control	37
6. Reigning at the cross	43
7. Is this really good news?	53
Part 2: Answers for a groaning world	61
1. Understanding the times	63
2. Careful connections	69
3. Is it really that bad?	75
4. Surely, I can do anything?	81
5. Tasting the truth	87
6. Getting our attention	91
7. So why?	99
Part 3: Answers for a groaning church	103
1. Changed for good	105
2. Fatherly discipline	113
3. Going deeper	119
4. Preparation	125
5. Pulling tent pegs	131
6. Through the gateway	137
7. For our good?	141

Part 4: The end of it all	145
1. Getting our bearings	149
2. No more death	153
3. No more pain	157
4. No more separation	161
5. The future's ...	165
Putting on the right glasses	167



# Why this book?

To write a book is to make two claims. First, that you have something worth saying that people would benefit from reading. Second, that in a world with millions and millions of books there is a role for the one you are writing.

I have to admit that both of these claims fill me with trepidation and would normally be enough to prevent me moving past the starting gate of any writing project. Yet, here is this book. So, why?

Suffering is something that we all experience in various ways and in differing degrees. It impacts the world in which we live, the people we love and our own personal lives.

Over the years I've had the privilege of walking with people through the valleys of suffering as well as the pain of my own experiences. In these I've found myself so often at a loss for words, trying to explain and desperately wanting to be able to offer the cure that would remove the agony.

From this place of inadequacy, I've had to come time and time again to the Bible. There I have found understanding, perspective, God's matchless promises, a place to point people to and a God we can trust in the middle of the storm.

I have discovered that on the question of suffering, God does not hide behind the cloud of anonymity. Rather, he is up front and often makes us uncomfortable with his blatant honesty. Yet, the Bible's teaching on suffering is essentially hope and encouragement focused

on God's wonderful promise that all things work together for the good of those who love him.<sup>1</sup>

These are truths that we all need to hear and there is a sense of urgency about them. Who knows when suffering will strike next?

The scope of this book is not the same as many others that I've read on suffering. Most of these have been written out of great tragedy and reflect lessons learned in the depths of pain. They are invaluable books, particularly when you find yourself in a dark place and need to hear from a 'friend' who has been there and can testify to the sweetness of the presence of God.

The approach here is deliberately different. My aim is to take a step back and give a bird's eye view of the Bible's teaching on suffering. Why? It is only when we think biblically about suffering that we will respond to it in a God centred and God glorifying way.<sup>2</sup>

My prayer is that this book will give you a biblical framework that can prepare you for suffering. My hope is that the truths here might encourage you to see the light in even the darkest times and help you to serve others who are struggling.

This book falls into four clear sections. Parts two and three will deal with the 'why' question. In the first part I will seek to establish a fundamental undergirding truth that sits behind every discussion of suffering in the scriptures – God's absolute and total sovereignty. The last part looks forward to and beyond the return of Jesus to the

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:28

<sup>2</sup> Romans 12:2

future hope of the new heavens and the new earth, a time without "death or mourning or crying or pain".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Revelation 21:4



*“He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: “What have you done?”*

*Daniel 4:35*



# Part 1

## A step into certainty

Our tendency is to dive into the conversation on suffering with a barrel full of 'why' questions. There is good reason for this. In general, the main times that we turn our thoughts in this direction are when we are in the middle of tragedy and disaster. At these moments we are not so concerned with underlying beliefs, but frantically clawing around for a reason why.

However, the Bible doesn't hit the subject of suffering head-on in this way. In his word, God does give us a framework from which to understand suffering in the world and in the church. But it is not a framework that hangs in mid-air above an empty abyss; rather, it is like a great tower set upon a solid and secure foundation. This bedrock is the reality of God's sovereignty over all things.

It is right that we start here as we seek to see what the Bible has to say about suffering. But before we begin, let me throw in an important statement that is particularly relevant when we are considering God's sovereignty in relation to suffering. The truth that God is in control of all things does not equate to the lie that God is the author of evil.

The realm of suffering is vast, and the causes are varied. Some suffering is the result of natural causes and other suffering is the result of the wicked acts of people. Some experiences are clearly the

direct consequence of the interference of Satan, while others come about within the normal expectations of the life we live.

The Bible teaches that God is in charge of all things and that nothing happens except by his express will, but that at the same time he is not the root or the cause of evil:

*When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; James 1:13*

Because of this, it is important to note that sometimes his will is worked out permissively, and at other times more actively. In all cases though, it is his will that is being worked out. Hopefully this will become clear as we look at this more closely.

In the following chapters we are not looking at the mechanics of how God works out his will, and how the different acts of different people fit within that; rather, we are seeking to show that no suffering occurs except by the will and permission of God. Essentially, no matter what we will go through, God is on the throne and in control of the situation.



# 1

## Satan on a leash

I remember the first gift I ever gave to my wife Anita. Soon after we had met, I had overheard her telling somebody how much she loved Tolkien's book, 'The Lord of The Rings'. It wasn't long before I found myself at the local bookshop buying her a copy.

There are many storylines that run through Tolkien's novel, but at the heart of it is the battle of good and evil. In the end, good triumphs. Yet, as you flip the pages and follow the characters on their adventures, you are never quite sure if this will be the final outcome. The side of evil certainly seems to hold the edge in the power stakes, and eventually it is an act of blind courage, some may say recklessness, on the part of the good guys and the self-destruction of greed that wins the day.

To many, Tolkien's portrayal of good and evil may well be an apt illustration of the relationship between God and the Devil: two opposing forces fighting it out over time, fairly matched and with no real certainty about who will win in the end. This is a far cry from the picture the Bible paints. There we are told that Satan is not God's equal. Instead, he was created by God and lives under his authority.

The first place we encounter Satan is in Genesis 3. Here he enters the Garden of Eden as the deceiver who successfully tempts Eve, and indirectly Adam, to disobey God. After this act of disobedience God arrives on the scene. He questions the three in turn, seeking to

disclose the culprit of the crime. In his role of judge, God pronounces judgement on the three parties and Adam and Eve are removed from the Garden.

As we observe these events, we get our first glimpse into the relationship between Satan and God. It is interesting to note the way that God interacts with Satan. His words are not those of the sledging sportsman trying to gain the upper hand, but those of the sovereign king exercising his calculated judgement:

*So the LORD God said to the snake, 'Because you have done this, 'Cursed are you above all the livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.' Genesis 3:14–15*

We see this authority displayed even more clearly when we think of the fulfilment of God's judgement as Jesus defeated Satan's power on the cross. In the hours before the cross we find Satan doing his best to strike at Jesus,<sup>4</sup> but Satan was powerless to stop God or to prevent his word from coming true. God is the king, Satan is under his authority.

Another passage that gives insight into God's authority over Satan is found in the introduction to the book of Job. Job is a book that really gets to grips with the question of suffering. The book breaks into three parts. In the first we are told about Job, a wealthy man who

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<sup>4</sup> John 13:27

loses almost everything – possessions and family – through various tragedies.

The second part contains an ongoing conversation between Job and his friends as they seek to make sense of their situation. The book ends with God having the final word and revealing himself as the sovereign God who holds all of creation in his hand.

At the beginning of the book of Job we are taken behind the scenes to a meeting between Satan and God that Job is not privy to. There we find God delighting in his servant Job and Satan challenging Job's faithfulness. The result is that God agrees to let Satan 'have a go' at Job. His words show us clearly who holds the authority. God replies:

*'Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.'* Job 1:12

Firstly, God gives his permission, for without it Satan cannot do anything. Secondly, he sets the boundaries, which Satan cannot exceed.

We used to have a family dog called Molly. It was my task to walk her each morning. The two of us would leave the house and walk down the road joined together by a piece of chain. Most of the time this chain was loosely hanging between us, but every now and again Molly would seek to wander to the left or right, to pull ahead or pull me back.

When this happened, I would tug on the lead bringing her back to her place by my side. Hopefully, it was clear in these times who was in charge. This is what is happening here between God and Satan. God has hold of the chain and he has set the limits. If the devil were to try

and move outside of them, he would find himself feeling a sharp tug returning him to his rightful place.

Near the end of the Bible we have another passage that shows, like those above and many others, that God and Satan are not 'equals' fighting it out. In Revelation 20:7-10 we read about the end of the devil. This is described to us as a great battle between the devil and his people and Christ and his people.

In the account, Satan raises a fearful army that is said to be as numerous as the sand on the seashore. Even though his army is so large the battle is not long. Fire comes from heaven and without fuss the army is devoured and Satan is thrown into hell. God is in total control of the situation. The devil brings his best to the battlefield and God just destroys him in a single swipe.

So, who is in charge when Satan works? It is clear that the devil is evil and desires to harm the purposes of God, the people of God and anything that God has made. He is very much responsible for his actions. However, he is not free, in the fullest sense of the word, to do anything he pleases. Rather, he is very firmly under the rule and authority of a sovereign God. He can do nothing more and nothing less than God has sovereignly decided.

We live in a world that has the fingerprints of Satan stamped across it. Nations are damaged by the greed of wicked rulers – Satan's influence is visible. Injustice and corruption are rife across the globe – Satan is gaining a foothold.

Let us forget, if we may, the global picture for a moment. We don't even need to look outside of our homes to see evidence of Satan's

influence. A child lies to his parents, or a father makes a promise he has no intention of keeping – Satan's blueprint is being displayed.<sup>5</sup>

In such a world it is a great encouragement to know that Satan's work is restrained and governed by the hand of a sovereign and good God. He will not win, and he cannot do anything that God does not will and permit. The truth of the Bible brings hope and comfort: God rules over Satan's work.

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<sup>5</sup> John 8:44



## 2

# Master of the storm

I was at the University of North Texas when a tornado came through the area. You could feel the change in atmosphere and the uncertainty as we rehearsed in our minds the emergency drill for just such an occasion.

Thankfully, for us, the heart of the storm ended up passing several miles away. However, the same could not be said of those living in Fort Worth. The next day I saw the effects from the Interstate Highway. Downtown Fort Worth looked like it had been struck by a bomb, with windows boarded up and the carnage clearly visible.

That day was the first time I was really struck with the power of the forces of nature and the devastation that they can cause. We live in a volatile world where natural disasters are a regular occurrence. Nonetheless, the question has to be: are they a random occurrence? To us they may feel haphazard but the Bible gives us a very different picture. It tells us that the elements of nature are firmly under the triune God's sovereign control.

God's charge over nature is first shown to us implicitly, although not in any disguised sense, in the first chapter of the Bible. Here God is revealed as the creator of the heavens and the earth. He is the one who separates the water and brings the universe into being. The picture is of a king making the world that he wants from a position of sovereign authority.

God's influence over creation does not end in the early chapters of Genesis. There have been those who have advocated that God is like a watchmaker who makes a watch, winds it up and then lets it go. This line of thought leads them to believe that God has wound up the universe and it now winds its way along on its own. That is not the God of the Bible. Consider these words about Jesus:

*The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. Hebrews 1:3*

On a second-by-second basis, God through His Son is upholding and sustaining the creation. Or, to put it more starkly, if Jesus were to stop sustaining, the creation would cease to exist.

Immediately, as we open our Bibles, we are confronted with a God who is above all things and over all things. The earth is his, the heavens are his and he shapes and moulds them as he chooses.

Later in the Bible, in the book of Job, this expression of God's sovereignty is made far more explicit. Job is a man trying to make sense of his suffering and is not being helped all that much by his three so-called comforters. Near the end of the book, a younger man called Elihu joins the conversation and does a little better, especially when he points Job towards God. Hear his words:

*Do you know how God controls the clouds and makes his lightning flash? Do you know how the clouds hang poised? Job 37:15-16*

Elihu is on to something as the next voice we hear is that of God himself picking up the same theme:



*Have you entered the storehouses of the snow or seen  
the storehouses of the hail, which I reserve for times of  
trouble, for days of war and battle? Job 38:22-23*

In both these passages we are confronted with a God who is not at the mercy of the elements, nor working with the elements, but who is in charge of the whole created order.

The Psalms is also a book that constantly confronts us with God's sovereignty over the forces of nature. Near the end of the book of Psalms, in Psalm 148, we read these words:

*Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea  
creatures and all ocean depths, lightning and hail,  
snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding.  
Psalm 148:7-8*

Here the elements are described as God's servants, similar to the angels in Psalm 103:20, who come and go at his command and carry out his sovereign plan.

This sovereign control is being worked out in 1 Kings 19 as God reveals himself to a ministry weary Elijah. We read of a wind coming on the mountain that shatters the rocks and an earthquake that shakes the mountain.<sup>6</sup> Next comes a great fire followed by the gentle whisper of the LORD. Now, it is true, the main point of this passage is not God's sovereignty over the elements of nature, but isn't it remarkable how God can summon the wind, earthquake and fire at his command as he teaches Elijah about his character and nature?

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Kings 19:11

There can be no denying that the passage teaches us that the elements are under his command.

Perhaps the clearest statement of God's authority over nature comes in one of the miracles of Jesus. One evening Jesus was crossing the Sea of Galilee in a boat with his disciples.<sup>7</sup> Jesus takes the opportunity to have some well-deserved rest in the stern leaving his disciples to handle the practicalities. That night a violent storm came up on the lake shaking the boat and its occupants to the core. They rushed to Jesus, woke him and with terrified hearts cried out:

*"Don't you care if we drown?" Mark 4:38*

A few years ago, Anita and I decided to go on a dolphin cruise off the coast of west Wales. As advised, we rang up the office in the morning to see if the trip was still on. The reply was a hopeful 'yes' with a bit of concern about the windy conditions. Finally, the decision was taken to proceed, and we headed out to the boat.

The first part of the cruise was fine, until we hit the open sea. Suddenly, the calm gentle water seemed to turn into an undulating monstrosity of towering waves and ravine-like troughs. To me it didn't appear to be safe and I was more than a little concerned that we might not be returning from our trip. However, when I looked at the skipper of the boat he was relaxed and calm. What was the difference? He had been there before, I hadn't. He knew there was no need to panic.

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<sup>7</sup> Mark 4:35-41

It is important to remember as we read this passage that the disciples were not novices on the Sea of Galilee. Many of them were experienced fishermen who had made their daily living on the water for several years. They had grown up there and knew the water and their boats like the backs of their hands. If they were frightened, this was a treacherous and dangerous storm.

What happens next is absolutely staggering. Jesus gets up, speaks to the wind and the waves and immediately the lake is as calm as a millpond and the air as peaceful as a quiet summer's evening. Just a word, that's all it took. No wonder the disciples ask:

*'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'*  
Mark 4:41

This is not just a man with great authority, this is someone with ultimate authority; he is the Son of God.

To us the forces of nature are frightening. We might be able to harness the power of the waves to generate electricity, but we can do nothing to stop a tsunami ransacking villages, towns and cities as it forces its way across miles and miles of land. We might be able to give a fairly accurate forecast for the weather over the next 24 hours, but we cannot determine it, change it or mould it in any way. We feel so small and helpless when we face up to nature's immense power.

However, the Bible teaches us that God does not live at the mercy of the weather. The elements do not dominate God, rather he commands them; not one wave can form, no matter how small, except by his will and permission.



### 3

## Not an 'off' day

At a conference, I heard a reference to a survey that asked people to think of one word that would sum up the 20th century. Evidently, one of the top words that was given was 'genocide'. At first this surprised me, but a trip to Google and an attempt to come to grips with even the most conservative estimates of the data changed my outlook. The 20th century has seen some of the most horrendous acts of genocide ever recorded.

Mao Ze Dong was the leader of the Chinese Republic from 1945 to 1976. It is estimated that over 50 million people were killed under the brutality of his regime. Hitler was the infamous leader of Germany at the time of the 2nd World War. During his rule around 12 million were murdered in concentration camps and in other ways and many others lost their lives as a result of his determination to rule the world.

At the same time as Hitler held the reins in Germany, Stalin was the ruler in nearby Russia. It is estimated that 6 million were killed in the Gulags, the purges and the Ukraine famine. Pol Pot was a revolutionary and later the leader of Cambodia. His death toll, 1.7 million.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> These figures have been taken from Piero Scaruffi's list at <http://www.scaruffi.com/politics/dictat.html> . There is quite a bit of variation concerning the precise figures.

These figures portray acts of horrendous injustice and despicable treatment of people by those in leadership over them. These acts brought about needless loss of life to satisfy the greed, pride and power-hungry appetite of those in power. They also raise a very serious question regarding the sovereignty of God: where was God while all this was taking place?

When we ask that question of the Bible, the answer we receive is this: God was in the same place as he always has been and always will be, on his throne guiding and directing the course of history. The evil acts of these evil regimes did not come into existence because God was having an "off" day. Rather, not one of these rulers or their actions occurred outside of the will and permission of a good, sovereign and almighty God.

The biblical proof for this comes in at least three strands that can be summarised in the following three statements: first, God appoints all authorities by his sovereign hand; second, God is bigger than any empire or power on earth; third, God allows evil regimes so that his purposes are accomplished.

### **God appoints all authorities**

In Romans 13:1-7, Paul the Apostle is teaching us how we should respond to those in authority. He begins by urging a spirit of submission and respect and his reason for this is:

*for there is no authority except that which God has established. Romans 13:1*

Then, as if anticipating our natural rebellion to authority, he says again:

*the authorities that exist have been established by God.  
Romans 13:1*

We encounter authority in varying degrees: from a parent at home, or a manager at work, all the way up to rulers of a country. Yet, each one, as this verse teaches, is established by the sovereign hand of God.

It is also worth noting that this statement doesn't come with the caveat 'good authority' and there is no way of injecting that into the text or the context of the passage. The readers were living in Rome and Nero was the emperor - the same Nero who notoriously persecuted followers of Jesus and is thought to have started the great fire of Rome, killing many and destroying homes in order to clear some land to build a bigger palace. Hardly a candidate for leader of the year, yet the Bible teaches he is reigning in Rome because God has established him there.

The same truth is stated in a conversation between Jesus and Pilate not long before Jesus is crucified on the cross. Pilate is frustrated because Jesus doesn't speak up for himself and blurts out a challenge:

*"Don't you realise that I have power either to free you  
or to crucify you?" John 19:10*

Here is Jesus' answer:

*"You would have no power over me if it were not given  
to you from above." John 19:10-11*

Pilate is in a position of authority in Judea and, humanly speaking, it has come about due to service and recognition from the powers that

be. However, Jesus points out that behind all of this is the sovereign and establishing hand of God. Pilate was there, as with Nero in Rome later in the same century, because God had placed him there.

There is perhaps an ease in accepting this teaching in the case of rulers who lived almost 2000 years ago. We don't know them and haven't had to live through the effects of their misused authority. However, if we started applying this to the men named above, those such as Hitler, Stalin and Mao Ze Dong we might find it a little more difficult.

Did God really establish them into positions of authority? The Bible confronts us with the answer that, yes, he did. Remember, when Paul wrote he did not do so from a 2000-year viewpoint. He wrote while Nero enacted his injustices upon the city and empire in which his readers lived. Is it any wonder he felt he had to stress his point?

### **God is bigger than them all**

Not only does the Bible teach that God establishes all authorities, but it also teaches that no human empire can ever make a serious claim to challenge his rule and reign. Isaiah 40:21-24 makes this point in a powerful way. In this passage we see the reign and authority of God pictured as a throne sitting above the circle of the earth and the heavens stretched out as a tent to live in. Here Isaiah draws on two images from royal life.

The first is the architecture of a throne room. This room would be on at least 2 levels. There would be the main floor where the courtiers stood and then, raised above the rest, there would be the level of the platform where the thrones stood. Height symbolised authority and



significance. Isaiah's point is clear, God doesn't sit on a raised platform in a throne room on earth, his authority is so overarching he sits raised above the world itself.

The second picture seems to reflect the nation at war. The army is marching out to war and night falls, so they set up camp. As you walk through the tents you approach the middle of the camp. Here you find the most elaborate and the largest tent of them all. It is the royal tent where the king stays. Like height in the throne room, here size and adornment symbolise authority and significance. Isaiah pushes us to begin to grasp the grandness of God's reign, his tent is the vastness and magnificence of the heavens.

The next thing that Isaiah does is draw a comparison with the reign of earthly rulers and the reign of the one true and living God. Or, rather, he shows that there is no comparison. He is the God who can end the reign of earthly princes at a word, he will outlast them all, he blows and they are gone.

God issues the challenge:

*"to whom will you compare me?" Isaiah 40:25*

There can be no answer, at no point can even the greatest prince match or begin to approach the power, authority and reign of God himself.

This truth is played out on the canvas of history as we read about God's dealings with the world in the Old Testament. At Babel, in Genesis 11, people joined together to exert their will and dominance

over God. Did it succeed? Not in the slightest, God sent confusion and from that point on different languages were spoken.

In the time of Moses, Pharaoh sought to overturn God's plan, but he could do nothing to prevent the plagues or his eventual destruction. Nebuchadnezzar, perhaps the most powerful king in the ancient world, was humbled by God and made to eat grass like the cattle until he acknowledged the sovereign rule of God.<sup>9</sup>

Earthly powers and rulers can seem a formidable proposition to us. What can we do to prevent the mass injustices that are performed on a daily basis in our world today? However, the Bible shows us that they are not formidable foes to God. He is so much greater and so much more powerful than they are.

Acknowledging that truth does raise certain questions. For instance, why did God not prevent the emergence of the concentration camps during the 2nd World War? He could, of that there is no doubt, but he allowed them to come into being and be used for such terrible purposes.

These are real and painful questions and we will try and answer some of the "whys" of suffering in a later part of this discussion. This is important, for the Bible teaches that God is not only sovereign, he is also good. For now, try to think of the alternative and see the comfort of what God has told us in his word. Imagine if these regimes were stronger than God, what then?

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel 4

What would the 20th century have been like if they really could plot their own path into ever increasing evil? Isn't there a comfort that over all rulers, bad and good, is the loving, merciful and righteous rule of a sovereign God?

### **God uses nations – even bad ones**

The prophet Habakkuk begins his book with a complaint to God about the situation in Judah.<sup>10</sup> He describes a scene of injustice and godlessness in the land. He is surrounded by a people who do not love God and things are in a real mess. God's answer horrifies the stricken prophet.

Instead of coming and reviving the hearts of his people, God is going to deal with the problem by bringing in the Babylonians. In fact, God's words are stronger and more active than that:

*“I am raising up the Babylonians.” Habakkuk 1:6*

That statement doesn't cause too much difficulty until it is combined with what God tells us about the Babylonians. They are:

*“that ruthless and impetuous people” Habakkuk 1:6*

And:

*“they are a law to themselves and promote their own honour.” Habakkuk 1:7*

The prophet's response seems perfectly reasonable in the circumstances:

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<sup>10</sup> Habakkuk 1:1-4

*“You, LORD, have appointed **them** to execute judgment.” Habakkuk 1:12 (emphasis mine)*

He follows this up with the obvious question:

*“Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?” Habakkuk 1:13*

Habakkuk spends the rest of his book wrestling with this tension as God shows him that Judah deserves what he is bringing upon them and calls Habakkuk to trust him.

The first chapter of Habakkuk teaches the sovereignty of God over the nations, even evil ones, but does so with an important qualification. While God is certainly in charge, he is not the source of the evil that these nations perform.

As God speaks about the evils of the Babylonians it is very clear that this is what they are, rather than what God will make them.<sup>11</sup> Here is an evil nation that God is using and raising up for his purposes, but at no point is God to be considered the author of their evil. Similarly, at no point are we given the sense that the nation, its authorities or its armies will not be held to account for their actions.

Isaiah leads us to the same understanding as he pronounces God's judgement on Assyria a few decades earlier. Here God indicates how he raised up the Assyrians and used them for his good and perfect purposes against Israel and Judah. However, God also says:

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<sup>11</sup> Cf Habakkuk 1:7,8,10 & 11

*this is not what he intends, this is not what he has in mind; his purpose is to destroy, to put an end to many nations. Isaiah 10:7*

We can summarise this teaching with two questions. First, as the Assyrians marched on Israel, who was in charge? The Bible shows us that God was. The Assyrians wouldn't have existed as a nation, nor the King of Assyria as their king, if God had not established them. The army would not have been able to march a millimetre in the direction of Damascus if God had not allowed it.

Now the second question: where did the evil acts of the Assyrians come from? The answer given in Isaiah and backed up with God's description of the Babylonians in Habakkuk is that the evil came from the wicked hearts of the Assyrian leaders and soldiers.

No Christian ever seems to have a problem in accepting God's sovereignty when it comes to good authorities. A new manager at work who is understanding and sympathetic is seen as an answer to prayer. A politician who fights for what is right and acts with common sense is seen as God's provision.

Yet, the Bible forces us to see God's sovereignty even where leadership rises that doesn't fit the 'good' pattern. No leader or authority, good or bad, can be raised up, or in fact do anything, outside of God's will and permission.

Where was God during the 20th century as millions died? We must not belittle the pain of these events or reduce the shock that such horrendous evil should implant in our hearts. Neither should we overlook the confusion that such events rightly raise in our finite

minds as we try to grapple with the purposes of an infinite God. Similarly, we should not remove the responsibility we have to battle against injustice and stand up for others.

However, we can and should find great comfort and hope in the truth that the Bible so clearly states – that during all these things God, who is perfect and holy, was in the place where he has always been, on the throne of all history.

None of these events happened because God had lost his grip on the world and Satan had gained the upper hand. Just think how scary that would be as we face the years to come. We can be comforted that God holds all nations and their leaders, present and future, in his hands.

## 4

# King on the ward

As a pastor I often visit hospitals. This is not something that I find easy. Don't get me wrong, I count it a privilege to share with people in their moments of need. I find it a joy to love and serve people by pointing them to Jesus. I find myself blessed by these visits – probably far more than the people I go to see are blessed by having me visit them. However, I cannot escape the fact that hospitals are full of sick and injured people and, as such, are places of suffering.

I sense the same tension as I visit people in their homes who haven't been able to make it to our Sunday gatherings due to long term sickness. It is great to see them, a delight to serve them and an encouragement to meet with them. Yet, I also feel a sense of deep sadness and a desire to weep as I watch them go through times of pain and struggle.

Where do sickness and physical impairments come from and why are they here? Do you ever ask that question? When we look at the beginning and the end of the Bible, we see that illness and pain were not part of God's original blueprint for humanity nor part of his eternal plan for the new heavens and the new earth. So why are they a reality today?

Is it because God is helpless to change things? As we read the Bible it should be clear that this answer is incorrect. There are reasons for suffering and many of them apply to sickness and physical problems,

but never are we told that the reason is the weakness of God. In the Bible, God demonstrates that he is in control of this realm as well as every other realm where we can experience suffering.

God's sovereignty over personal suffering can be seen in the following three accounts in the Bible.

### **A man struck down**

The first is an account we have already looked at: the suffering of Job. In the book of Job, we encounter a faithful follower of God who suffers in a devastating way.

At the beginning of the book, Job loses family, property and physical well-being and is left in a grieving and painful condition. His wife challenges the consistency of his faith in God and this prompts one of Job's most well-known statements:

*"You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" Job 2:10*

It is important to note that Job's words are more than a reminder of the continuation of Job's faith. They are also a clear declaration that the circumstances of his suffering, loss and illness, are firmly under the sovereign control of God himself.

But, is that strictly true? In Job 1 we eavesdrop on a conversation between God and Satan. As a result, we know (although Job doesn't) that Satan has challenged God about the faithfulness of Job and that God has given Satan permission to stretch out his hand against Job and inflict him with sickness.



Could Job's statement be misguided and based on his own ignorance of the situation? No, as shown in an earlier chapter, Job 1 teaches us that Satan is the agent of Job's suffering, but God is the one in control.

One of the lessons of Job is that Satan can go no further than God allows and permits him to. The devil cannot touch Job's home, family or body outside of the limits that God has set. Job is not sick because God has been duped by the trickery of Satan. Rather, not even a single ounce of Job's suffering can occur outside of the will and permission of God.

### **A man born blind**

God's sovereignty over physical impairment is also shown in an encounter between Jesus and a man who was born blind. The disciples begin the conversation with a probing question. They ask Jesus:

*"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" John 9:2*

Their question reflects a common view of the day that the presence of suffering was a sign of God's displeasure and judgment for sin. Jesus replied as follows:

*"Neither this man nor his parents sinned... but this has happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." John 9:3*

Jesus' response dispels a simplistic view of the reasons for suffering and affirms God's sovereign purpose in the man's blindness. Clearly Jesus teaches here that there is not a "one size fits all" response to

human suffering. It may be that suffering is a direct or indirect result of personal sin, however there are also many other reasons that the Bible gives for suffering in our lives. This is something we have to bear in mind whenever we seek to answer the 'why' question.

Whatever the specific purpose for the suffering of this man, it is as important to see that Jesus does not deny, rather he affirms, that God does have a purpose in it and, therefore, is sovereign over it.

The man is not blind because God made a mistake. Instead, we are to see his blindness as part of the outworking of the plans and purposes of a sovereign God.

### **A man in authority**

In Luke 7 we meet a centurion whose servant is sick and about to die. He sends a delegation of Jewish leaders to Jesus asking him to come and heal his servant. Jesus agrees and sets out for the centurion's house. Before he gets there the centurion sends another delegation, this time some friends, with this important message:

*"Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof... say the word, and my servant will be healed." Luke 7:6-7*

His reasoning is insightful:

*"for I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes." Luke 7:8*

The centurion is a man who understands authority from both perspectives. He has people over him and knows that when they

speak, he must obey. He also has men under him who must listen to his command. He understands that Jesus is in a position of authority, but authority with a difference.

The authority that Jesus wields is not simply over a few men within the army, but over the whole of creation, including the sickness that is ravaging the body of his servant. He understands that when Jesus speaks, the sickness must listen and obey, no questions asked.

At the end of the encounter we see that the centurion wasn't mistaken in his understanding about Jesus. Jesus' words are not recorded in Luke, but the outcome is. The friends return and find the servant restored to health, not 'being restored' but totally, immediately and completely healed.<sup>12</sup>

Jesus commanded and the sickness obeyed. These aren't two powers battling for prominence. Jesus is clearly in charge and sickness must follow his orders.

Illness and physical impairment are things that are greatly feared today. We spend billions of pounds on research as we attempt to come up with the latest cures and medical techniques, yet, ultimately, we are losing the battle. No cure is certain, no recovery is definite and in the end something will 'get us'.

This is something that we cannot conquer, but then it is not something we need to; for, as the Bible teaches, God is in charge and has all things within his grasp.

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<sup>12</sup> Luke 7:10

Not one germ can affect my body, not one cancer cell can develop within me and not one blood vessel can be damaged outside of the will and permission of a good and perfect God.

## 5

## Every attack under control

Several years ago, Anita and I heard a missionary talk that focused on the difficulties faced by Christians around the world as they are persecuted for their faith in Jesus. As we listened, we were burdened to pray for those in far more difficult situations than ourselves and were compelled to sign up for a prayer bulletin. Since then, it has become our practice to use this bulletin each day when we pray as a family. I cannot tell you how many times I've read the words with a broken heart, barely managing to keep my voice together.

Today, many in Christ's church are experiencing horrendous ordeals. Some congregations are interrupted by machine gun fire. Others need to keep a watchful eye out for the next bomb that might be planted in their meeting place. Parents have their daughters stolen away to be married to men they don't know and forced to renounce Jesus.

Rape, pillaging, injustice, hatred, violence and much more are the risks that many believers face around the world on a daily basis. Even the authorities often support, or at least do nothing to prevent, the perpetrators of this persecution. On a human level it seems hopeless.

Why do these things happen? The Bible reminds us that this world is the arena of a battle between the forces of light and the forces of

darkness.<sup>13</sup> The effects of this reality impact us in all kinds of ways. Why are there attacks on Christians in the workplace? Because of this battle. Why does a child who has committed her heart to Jesus face bullying for her faith? Because of this battle. Why does the church in certain countries have to hide away for fear of the authorities? Because of this battle.

When persecution comes, we shouldn't be surprised. In fact, Jesus tells us that as Christians we should expect a level of persecution in this world. How else can we interpret words such as these?

*"All men will hate you because of me [Jesus], but he who stands firm to the end will be saved." Mark 13:13*

We are in a battle and find ourselves on a different side to the rest of the world, therefore we should expect to be under attack.

Yet, how should we understand this battle? Where is God in all this hardship? The Bible is clear as it teaches us about God's place in the battle between light and darkness. He is not fighting in this merely as one who has the potential to win should things go right for him. Instead, we are to understand that he is supreme in the battle. He is in control and could end it at a single stroke. He is in charge of every aspect and that includes the persecution of his people.

We can see this truth etched all over the Bible and all over history. In the book of Exodus, we find God's people, Israel, going through a period of persecution. A new king comes to power who has no

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<sup>13</sup> Ephesians 6:10-18

knowledge of how Joseph and God have served Egypt in the past. The Egyptians are in fear of a growing people and the result is:

*they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labour. Exodus 1:11.*

The battle between light and darkness is flaring up and God's people appear to be on the sharp end of the sword.

Yet, the Bible shows us that God is in control even in these events. Years before God had given Abraham a prophecy:

*"Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years." Genesis 15:13*

Here God explained to Abraham precisely what would happen to the people of Israel, even down to the length of their persecution.

How can he say that? One answer would be to say God knows the future. That is certainly true, but that is only half the answer. Biblical prophecy is not so much a statement of the foresight of God, but a statement of the intention of God. It is an intention that always comes true because he keeps his word and, as we consistently see in the Bible, he is in sovereign control of history.

Another way that we see God's control of the situation is in his treatment of Pharaoh and Egypt. He commissions a man named Moses to tell Pharaoh to let the people go. Pharaoh says "no" and this precipitates a series of ten plagues sent by God as judgment on Pharaoh. At the end of each plague Pharaoh has an opportunity to

obey God, but he consistently refuses. However, the Bible tells us that this refusal is not only his own doing.

At the start of the plagues we are told that Pharaoh hardened his heart, yet later we are told:

*the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart. Exodus 9:12*

What does this reveal to us? God is not the author of evil, but he is in control of it. Pharaoh was as much under the jurisdiction of God as anyone else.

Lastly, we see God's control over this time of persecution in his eventual victory. After ten plagues Pharaoh relented and agreed that the people of Israel could leave and go back to the land of Canaan. It wasn't long, however before he changed his mind and decided to chase after them. He tracked them down by the Red Sea. The Israelites were faced with the sea in front of them and the marauding Egyptian army behind them.

Yet, they were on God's side. He separated the sea so that they could walk across and then he brought back the waters to engulf the entire army of Pharaoh. What do we see here? That in the end Pharaoh and whole of Egypt had no answer to the power and might of God. He, and he alone, is the sovereign King.

Acts 4 also shows us God's control over persecution. Here the early church has encountered the first major barrier in their evangelisation of the world – the antagonism of the Jewish authorities. Peter and John have been hauled up in front of the Sanhedrin (the same council so instrumental in bringing Jesus before Pilate) and ordered to cease



from preaching about Jesus. When they return from their ordeal the church turned to God in prayer, and what a prayer it was!

What is remarkable is that they don't pray for the persecution to end. Instead, they remind themselves that God is completely sovereign and ask him to give them the strength to be faithful in the middle of the persecution. They quote Psalm 2, a poem that speaks of a sovereign God whose will is carried out whether the rulers of the world like it or not; they remind themselves that Jesus' death was the outworking of God's will; and they throw themselves on the Lord in their situation. There is no doubt in their minds – the persecution they know is not an accident and it is not outside of the realm of God's control.

Another pointer to the sovereignty of God over the persecution of his people is found in the results of the oppressive treatment that Christians and the church undergo. As the second-century preacher Tertullian observed, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."<sup>14</sup> Many have been inspired and much has occurred for the glory of Christ as a direct result of the persecution and death of his people. Satan throws his worst at God's people and all he does is help to build the church. How ironic is that?

In Acts 7 Stephen is stoned. The result: the church spreads and many hear the gospel. In 1521 Martin Luther was hidden away in a castle to prevent him from being killed. The result: the translation of the New Testament into German and the writing of many books that helped the people to see the core truths of the gospel. In 1954 foreign

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<sup>14</sup> [http://www.reformationtheology.com/2006/05/the\\_blood\\_of\\_the\\_martyrs.php](http://www.reformationtheology.com/2006/05/the_blood_of_the_martyrs.php)

missionaries were expelled from China. The result: the church grew at an extraordinary rate with millions coming to faith. There is a pattern here. Over and over, from the jaws of the enemy's apparent victory comes the triumph of Jesus, the King of Kings.

Persecution is a reality that the church will face to greater or lesser degrees across the world. It is a painful and distressing experience, particularly for those who undergo it, but also for those who watch on. It raises many questions that God's word answers with the continual reminder that God is in control.

The book of Revelation was given to encourage churches, many of whom were undergoing persecution. Near the beginning of this vision given to John by Jesus, he is shown a great big picture of the throne of God.<sup>15</sup> It is a sovereign, indestructible and untouchable throne. What a comfort to be reminded that God has all things in hand and the enemies of Jesus will never win the battle.

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<sup>15</sup> Revelation 4

## 6

# Reigning at the cross

I can think back to many moments in my own short lifetime where I have seen things that have shocked and appalled me. On one occasion I was watching the news. The story being told concerned thousands of children who were starving due to the greed of government officials. As pictures were shown of malnourished and helpless children, pity, compassion and anger were mixed deep inside me in a cocktail of emotions. Such greed and suffering are wrong, and wherever we see such injustice and the consequences of evil we are right to be revolted by what we see.

Yet, none of these tragic circumstances, no matter how bad they get, should appal us as much as the historical reality of the cross of Jesus. For, as the Bible clearly shows, this was the greatest act of injustice and the most defiant act of evil ever to be committed in this world past, present or future.

To see this, we just need to come to the foot of the cross of Jesus and ask four questions.

### **Who is this man?**

The centurion who had charge of the guard that day echoes the truth that the Bible declares time and time again,

*“Surely this man was the Son of God!” Mark 15:39*

The crucifixion of the Son of God was not merely an act of human injustice, it was the ultimate fist-shaking act of human defiance against a sovereign God. It was the epitome and climax of our rebellion against God. There can be nothing worse than that!

### **What had this man done wrong?**

The writer of the book of Hebrews explains:

*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Hebrews 4:15*

Did Jesus do anything deserving of death? Absolutely not! It wasn't just that he hadn't broken any Roman or Jewish laws, but he hadn't broken any of God's laws either. From a legal standpoint there is no case that can be made for the death of Jesus, he simply did not deserve to die and shouldn't have been crucified.

### **Why wasn't he let go?**

If you take a look at the records of those who received the death sentence in the UK before its partial abolition in 1965 and full abolition in 1998 you might be more than a little disturbed. This is not so much because of the number sentenced to death or the crimes they committed, but because of the number who were sentenced, killed and later found to be innocent. Here are two examples:

Timothy Evans sentenced to death on 9th March 1950, given a posthumous pardon in 1966.

George Kelly sentenced to death on 28th March 1950, his conviction was squashed posthumously in 2003.

As tragic as these cases are, it is possible to understand how the mistakes were made. A jury, made of twelve fallible people, listens to the evidence and sought, in good faith, to come to the right answer. These were mistakes, severe ones, but nonetheless honest ones. However, this cannot be said of those who tried Jesus.

The false evidence brought against Jesus was so fragile that even those who hated him had to throw it out.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Pilate and Herod examined Jesus thoroughly without finding any reason for crucifying him. His innocence was abundantly clear and beyond denial. The reason Jesus was hung on the cross had nothing to do with a misguided belief in his guilt, but with the feelings, fears and hatred of those who tried him. The cross of Jesus was nothing short of a wicked act of people abusing their authority and influence and acting in rebellion against a holy God.

### **How was he treated?**

Remember, Jesus was a man who went around healing the sick and caring for those who were hurting in all kinds of different ways. He had been straight with people but had always done it from a heart of love. It is even more surprising then to see a complete lack of compassion in the way he was treated from the point of his arrest to his death on the cross.

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew 26:59-60

The temple guards beat and taunted him, the Sanhedrin spat at him and struck him, Pilate had him flogged and crucified, the Jewish leaders mocked and taunted him and even those who hung there next to him joined in pouring scorn upon him. His kindness was returned with brutality, his care repaid with pain and his love rewarded with abject hatred. Has there ever been an event as wicked and evil as this in its extremes and injustice?

Having understood this, it is startling to turn to the book of Acts and read the sermon that Peter preached just a matter of weeks after the cross. All the events of that day are fresh in his mind and you can hear it in correct accusation he brings:

*“You, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.” Acts 2:23*

Yet, that is not where he begins. Take note of these words:

*“This man [Jesus] was handed over to you by God’s **set purpose** and foreknowledge.” Acts 2:23 (emphasis mine)*

These are staggering words, because Peter is telling us that even this extreme act of evil was always firmly under the control of God. The cross was not an act of victory against God; instead, it only happened because it was in the supreme will of God.

These words in Acts 2 are not the only place in the Bible where this truth is revealed to us. In fact, it is a reality that saturates the pages of Scripture from the pictures, promises and pointers of the Old Testament through to the closing words of the book of Revelation. As

we read the pages of God's word, we can affirm time and time again that the cross was not a surprise, an accident or a mistake.

### **The cross was not a surprise**

Surprises can be pleasant or unpleasant. One Sunday I came home from church to find a strange car in the driveway. When I opened the door to the lounge, I found some old friends who I hadn't seen for years. The next day was my birthday and my wife had organised their visit as a surprise.

I hadn't expected it or seen it coming. Just for the record, that was a pleasant surprise, but not every surprise is like that. Often hard and difficult things happen that we weren't expecting. Is that what happened at the cross? Did Jesus get broadsided by a tragedy that he simply didn't foresee?

It would be very hard to support this when we weigh up the words of the Bible. The Old Testament is full of pictures and promises of the cross. The most notable is found in Isaiah 53. Here we are told:

*He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed  
for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us  
peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.  
Isaiah 53:5*

Approximately 750 years before Jesus was born God was telling us what would happen to his Son; he would die and die painfully.

It's clear too that Jesus knew this and went to Jerusalem with a clear understanding of what would happen. Mark summarises his teaching to his disciples:

*He then began to teach them that the Son of Man [Jesus] must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. Mark 8:31*

Jesus didn't hang on the cross wondering what had all gone wrong. Rather, he had known what would happen and still he went to Jerusalem, still he allowed himself to be rejected, still he kept quiet before Pilate and still he didn't call on the angels to save him as he hung there on the cross.

### **The cross was not an accident**

Accidents happen. Things go wrong when we meant them to go right and often the consequences are extremely painful. Take a hammer, a bunch of nails and a piece of wood. It doesn't take much hammering the nails into the wood before your arm gets tired, your aim goes off and the hammer comes crushing down on your tender and unprotected thumb. Ouch!!!! Don't worry the throbbing stops after a few hours and thumb nail will grow back again.

So, was this what happened at the cross? Jesus meant to do something else, leisurely and easily, but instead the hammer slipped and he ended up with the brutality of the cross.

Certainly not! The cross was as intentional as you can get. Back to Isaiah 53:

*it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer. Isaiah 53:10*



God the Father meant for Jesus, his Son, to die on the cross. It wasn't an accident.

Similarly, we are told in Luke's Gospel of a change in Jesus' ministry:

*As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. Luke 9:51*

Jesus was going back to heaven, but before he did, there was a job to do in Jerusalem. From other statements in the gospels we know that Jesus recognised this work as his death and resurrection. He intentionally went to Jerusalem with the sole purpose of dying on the cross later in the week.

The cross was not an accident; it was an intentional act of a sovereign God.

### **The cross was not a mistake**

Well, if the cross were not a surprise and it wasn't an accident was it all a mistake? Look at Jesus hanging there all bloodied and torn and tell me that some part of you doesn't want to ask, 'What's gone wrong?' Certainly, that was the way his disciples felt. Jesus had come full of miracles and powerful words. He had the potential to turn Judea upside down and now here he is hanging on a cross. It must be a big mistake and now evil has won the day.

No, that's not how the Bible puts it; and it is not how we should see it either. Because the cross was not the victory of evil over God, but the supreme and final victory of God over evil. Notice how Isaiah expresses it:

*he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed  
for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us  
peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.  
Isaiah 53:5*

The death of Jesus achieved something that could not be achieved in any other way, the saving of sinful people from God's judgment for sin.

The cross was not a mistake because it was the central activity of God's rescue plan for rebellious sinners like you and me. This rescue plan is first shown to us in Genesis 3:15 and we are shown its awesome completion when Jesus returns and brings his people into the New Heavens and the New Earth.<sup>17</sup>

The work was done, and the rescue completed 2000 years ago as Jesus hung on a piece of wood just outside Jerusalem, was then buried in a tomb and on the third day rose again. As Jesus put it:

*'Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the  
Son of Man must be lifted up [reference to the cross],  
that everyone who believes in him may have eternal  
life.'* John 3:14-15

The sovereignty of God over all things is not an abstract truth without any bearing on us. Previous chapters, I hope, have shown that it has bearing on the realities of life in a fallen world and here we see that it is interwoven into the heart of the good news of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection.

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<sup>17</sup> Revelation 21-22

The cross is filled with hope because God is a sovereign God and he intended for it to happen. The glory of the gospel is not that Jesus died because God could not save him. Rather, it is that God knew what he was doing, ordered every step and sent his Son to die on the cross to destroy sin and death so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. Now, that's glorious!



## 7

## Is this really good news?

*"When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other." Ecclesiastes 7:14*

Sharing at a 'Desiring God' conference, Krista Horning, a lady who was born with a rare genetic condition called Apert Syndrome, speaks about how she lives with disability.<sup>18</sup> She speaks about the lies that her disability tells her and contrasts it with the truth that God speaks through the Bible. It is interesting that one of the first truths she mentions is that God is in charge of her disability. She states that her disability is not an accident of nature, but part of who God has made her to be in his sovereign and perfect will.

Now such a statement can raise huge questions in our hearts and minds. How can God do that? Can God really be a God of love and allow, no, even will, these things to happen? Any frank conversation on the reality of God's sovereignty in a world of suffering is bound to leave us feeling just a little uncomfortable with some of the conclusions that we must come to. We begin to wonder whether we really know what God is like. This has certainly been the case as I've written these chapters and I think I am safe to assume it is probably the case for you as you've read them.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DNmge8a6clo>

Yet, I am also convinced that the hope, peace and joy that we can know as we delight in the truth of God's complete control of all things far outweighs the questions and difficulties that it raises in our minds. Here I just want to summarise the positives by pointing out how the truth of God's sovereign rule over all things, including suffering of all kinds, transforms our understanding of suffering in the world.

### **Suffering isn't accidental**

If God is in control it means that accidents don't happen. This world is not a random place running out of control where evil invades in a regular and unbridled fashion. That would leave us in a hopeless position with no certainty as we face the future. Each moment would hold only the fear of 'what ifs'. What if Satan got too strong? What if evil became too widespread? What if suffering became too intense?

Suffering spiralling out of control is not the future that the Bible presents to us. Instead, we see that the God who made the world is still in control and firmly on the throne despite all the attempts to dethrone him and the widespread rejection of him. The future belongs to God; a God who is pure, perfect, holy and merciful. There is reason to hope because God is in control.

### **Suffering isn't aimless**

One of the most common verses to turn to in times of difficulty is this one in Romans:

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28*

Now, this verse is not a promise that life will only be filled with ease, health and material well-being, but that God has a purpose in every event in this world to bless his people with good things. The context roots this blessing in God's great purpose to make people like Jesus.<sup>19</sup>

Hope spills over from this verse as we live in a fallen and sin-sick world. We are confronted by suffering on a daily basis, but how different it looks when we realise that the sovereign, holy and merciful God is working out good things through the presence of suffering in the world.

We might not understand it, but we can know it and have hope. However, it is important to note that if God is not in control this verse is only an empty promise of hope that raises our spirits while at the same time condemning us to eternal misery.

If God is not in control of all things, then we have to allow for the presence of at least some evil and suffering that sits outside of the will and purposes of God. That means that there could be, or already are, present in this world events and circumstances that have been placed there without God's say-so and, therefore, are outside of his control.

Who can say that these evils won't bring ultimate harm to God's people rather than bless them by pointing them to Jesus and transforming them into his likeness?

Yet, the Bible does not bring this verse to us in the empty vacuum of an impotent God, but with the solid certainty of a God who is in

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<sup>19</sup> Romans 8:29

charge, a God who reigns and God who far surpasses any other power and authority. God is so much bigger than all else we can think of. As a later verse puts it:

*If God is for us, who can be against us? Romans 8:31*

## **Suffering isn't eternal**

The Bible ends by giving us a glimpse into a glorious future for God's people. It speaks of a new heaven and a new earth, a perfectly restored relationship with God and the end of suffering:

*There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.  
Revelation 21:4*

Isn't it good to know that suffering will not be the eternal companion of God's people, but is just for the brief moment of this life?

Yet, even this promise can only be held out because God is sovereign over all things. Imagine the opposite: evil has free reign and rears its ugly head in whatever way it would like to. If God is not in charge, who can say that evil won't pluck something out of the bag that God can't handle, can't wrap up and can't destroy at the end of time?

Who can say that evil won't make a later appearance to ruin the new creation as its presence has ruined the current one? Only a God who is sovereignly in charge of all things, even evil and suffering, can bring any kind of guarantee that a time is coming where suffering will be no more.

Yes, I am often confused as I look at the world. I find myself wondering what is going on and my limited understanding and



wisdom struggles to come to terms with the plan of God as it is played out on the tapestry of history. At times I desperately want to excuse God from having any part in the suffering I see.

However, I am so thankful that in it all I know God is in control. There is reason to hope because we are not observing random emptiness, but the good purposes of God who is bringing the world to a place where, in Jesus, suffering will be a thing of the past.

So, if God's in charge, why does he allow evil and suffering to exist in his world? We turn to this next.



*We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*

*Romans 8:22*



## Part 2

# Answers for a groaning world

His eyes looked with fear as the hand descended. He was only a boy and the hand belonged to someone much older, much stronger. He looked at the needle grasped between the fingertips ready to dive into his flesh. He winced and squirmed and tried to pull away, but he was held too tightly.

He turned away as the needle plunged in. If he couldn't see it, maybe he could bear it. But the prodding and probing was too much. He cried out and the tears began to fall down his cheeks. Then it stopped. He turned back to be met with a broad smile, the needle held up and on its tip the piece of wood that had been embedded in his foot.

The 'why' question is an important one. It is the difference between harm and good, between help and hurt. This is vital to grasp when we come to look at suffering in the world. If God is in control of every incident and situation in the world and no evil or suffering can occur outside of his will and permission, can he really be called a good God when suffering exists?

I fully understand the problem and tension of that question, but it has missed a step. It hasn't asked why God might will and permit suffering to occur. It is here where we see that God is not only in control of all suffering and evil, but he is also essentially good.

Over the next two parts of this book we are going to ask the ‘why’ question in two ways. Later on, in part 3 we will ask why God wills or permits suffering in the lives of Christians. But first, in part 2 we will take a more general approach: why is there suffering in the world?

Before we begin it’s important to note two points. First, we are asking a very specific ‘why’ question. To every act or situation there can be multiple causes and multiple ‘whys’. We are not trying to understand the motivation of each person involved, but ask why God, who is in sovereign control, would permit and will this to take place.

The second point we need to note is the type of conclusion we can draw from this. We will see that the Bible has a lot to say about suffering and why God would will and permit suffering. However, its answers are to be seen in a general sense, not as particular answers for each and every situation. When famine strikes, mass murder occurs, or cancer sets in we are given some answers as to why this may be. We aren’t given a check sheet to discover exactly what God is thinking or doing.

## 1

## Understanding the times

The beach was beautiful. I could see why we'd made the two-hour journey for a day by the sea. Some friends had brought their boat and we were taking it in turns to go out for a spin. They had an inflatable doughnut and each of us got a turn to see how long we could hang on.

It was a fishing boat, not a speed boat, so when my turn came, I was surprised how fast I was going. I remember bouncing across the water clinging on to the handles of the doughnut, determined not to be thrown off. In the boat they were taking it personally and upping the speed and changes of direction all the time until eventually the inflatable went one way and I flew the other.

With my mouth open I plunged into the water. By the time the boat came around to pick me up, I'd come back to the surface and almost emptied the sea out of my mouth. I reached out to take the extended arms and simply said, 'It's salty!' The look was one of bemusement. The reply, 'What did you expect, it's the sea!'

When suffering strikes this is one of the answers the Bible gives us. When we are confused by the pain and hurt around us, God says, 'What did you expect, it's a fallen world?'

In the book of Romans we are told that the whole of creation is groaning in pain and agony.<sup>20</sup> It is a place of frustration, in bondage and falling apart at the seams. Why?

*For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it.  
Romans 8:20*

To understand this better we need to go back to the beginning. The Bible tells us that when God made all things, he made them well and he made them very good.<sup>21</sup> We get the clear impression of paradise on earth with Adam and Eve living in the Garden of Eden in a perfect relationship with each other and with God.

Yet, it doesn't stay that way for long. In the middle of garden was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and God had given a clear and simple command:

*you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." Genesis 2:17*

The snake tempts Eve who then eats the fruit and shares it with Adam. They sin, God comes to the garden and they hide in the shame of their nakedness.<sup>22</sup> What follows is a series of judgements from God on Satan, on Eve and on Adam followed by their removal from the Garden of Eden.

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<sup>20</sup> Romans 8:22

<sup>21</sup> Genesis 1:31

<sup>22</sup> Genesis 3:8



These judgements don't only affect Adam and Eve, they affect all of humanity. Throughout the next chapters we watch the growing disease of sin in the human race as well as the clear presence of death. Notice, though, human beings are not the only ones affected by the curses God pronounces. For instance:

*To Adam he said... "Cursed is the ground because of you." Genesis 3:17*

As a result of Adam and Eve's sin the creation itself falls under the curse of God. Here is the event that we are told about in Romans. Because of that first sin and God's judgement on it the whole of creation is groaning in agony and pain.

The Bible tells us that although God made everything perfect, that is no longer the world we live in. We live in a world with sin; a world under God's curse. We are not innocent people whose lives are invaded by suffering. Instead, we are part of a fallen humanity who have tainted this universe with our sin and are living under the curse. Therefore, what should we expect as we look around us? Should we expect everything to be rosy?

Living after the fall is not the only reason why we see suffering in the world around us today. It is also because we live between the cross and the return of Jesus. When Jesus speaks to his disciples about his return, he is clear that while they cannot know the day<sup>23</sup> there will be signs and events that lead up to it:

*You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen,*

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<sup>23</sup> Matthew 24:36

*but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains. Matthew 24:6–8*

Growing up in the 1980s, I can still remember the appeals and news reports about the famine that occurred in Ethiopia from 1983-1985. Horrendous pictures of malnourished children filled the TV screens and the hearts of many were moved to give.

On March 11<sup>th</sup> 2011, a huge earthquake struck off the shore off North-east Japan. The result was a tsunami, at points around 39 meters tall, that swept towards land and reached up to 6 miles inland. As a result, the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant was seriously damaged. Over 15 000 people were killed.<sup>24</sup>

In 1991, after the fall of the Iron Curtain and a radical change in the landscape of Eastern Europe, war broke out in former Yugoslavia. Nations that had been pushed together now rose up against each other. In amongst the fight for independence and national identity were awful acts of genocide and millions displaced.

None of these events are things of joy. They are times of pain and suffering and should stir up compassion and grief within us. Yet, at the same time they should not surprise us. Jesus tells us that these are the things that must happen as his return approaches.

Why is this world a place of suffering? It's the time in which we live.

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<sup>24</sup> Details sourced from <https://www.livescience.com/39110-japan-2011-earthquake-tsunami-facts.html>

Why is there suffering? Because we live in a fallen world under God's judgement.

Why do we see so much distress? Because Jesus is coming and has not yet come.

The presence of suffering, while painful and hard, should not be unexpected.



## 2

# Careful Connections

He was led from the courthouse and loaded into the van. His head was bowed as he came to terms with the words he'd just heard. Prison, that was the sentence. How long had the judge said? 'Life'. His solicitor had explained that he may get parole after 15 years. Still, that was a long time.

It didn't seem that long ago when he'd thought he wouldn't get caught. Armed robbery hadn't been his plan, but that's what the gang had chosen. Still, he hadn't expected to use the gun, let alone kill someone. He'd dumped the evidence and laid low just as they'd said. Yet, the police had figured it out and come knocking on the door. What could he do? He'd done the crime, now he must do the time.

Even if we haven't been in that situation the principle is one that we all know well. If we break the rules there are consequences, punishments. This is the case growing up at home and is the same in school and the workplace as well as in the wider community.

As the Bible explains why there is suffering in the world, one of the answers is that we break the rules and sometimes the suffering we know is a direct result of this. We've already seen that the Bible explains suffering as a result of God's general judgement on the world because of sin. But now we will consider God's more specific judgements as a result of our individual sins.

It is true, the Bible speaks of punishment for sin mostly as an eternal consequence. It points towards the final judgement as the time when sin will be dealt with and God's judgement will be enacted.<sup>25</sup> Yet, it also speaks of occasions when God's judgement breaks into this life.

One of the most well-known incidents of this is the global flood that occurred during Noah's lifetime. So often we think of this time as a sweet and cute children's story about animals, an ark and Mr Noah with his fluffy white beard. It isn't.

Now, I don't want to minimise what God did through the ark by saving the animals and Noah and his family. This is fundamentally a salvation story and one that points us to Jesus in whom we can be saved from the judgement to come.

Yet, if we do not have a clear view of the backdrop to the ark, we won't understand how incredible that salvation was. As the waters built up on the earth we are told:

*Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died. Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out; men and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds of the air were wiped from the earth. Genesis 7:22–23*

How many people and how many animals? We don't know the precise number, but we do know it was everyone who wasn't on the ark with Noah. This is an event of unspeakable suffering. What was Noah saved from? Total and complete destruction.

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<sup>25</sup> Acts 17:31

So why was there a flood? Why did God bring this about? The answer is sin. God saw the wickedness of people and evil of their hearts and his response was:

*“I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth—men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air—for I am grieved that I have made them.” Genesis 6:7*

The suffering of the flood was a direct punishment for sin.

In the flood we see this on a global scale, but the Bible also speaks about this occurring on a national scale as well. In Exodus we read of ten plagues that God brings on Egypt. These are plagues that become increasingly hard for the people and bring greater and greater levels of suffering. Why does God do this? He tells Abraham several hundred years earlier:

*“I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions.” Genesis 15:14*

After the Israelites leave Egypt they eventually come to the land of Canaan, the land God had promised to give to Abraham and his descendants. What follows is many battles, loss of life and the Canaanites losing their cities, homes and possessions. Why does God do this? Again, he tells Abraham several hundred years earlier:

*“In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.” Genesis 15:16*

The timing and manner of their return to the promised land was due to the sin of the people of the land. In these acts of suffering God was directly punishing nations for their sin.

The Bible also speaks about suffering as a direct result of sin on an individual level too. Jezebel was a queen in the northern kingdom of Israel. One day, a man called Jehu killed her son, Joram, and then came to the palace where she was. Her servants turned against her and threw her out of the window onto the ground below. After dinner they came out to bury her, only to find that the corpse had been eaten by dogs.<sup>26</sup>

Now on no level is that a pleasant scene. It is a scene that is dripping with groaning and everything that seems wrong with this world. So why did it happen? Why did God who was in control bring it about? The answer is that God was judging Jezebel for her sin.

Several years earlier Jezebel had schemed on behalf of her husband to kill a man named Naboth. Her reason was that Ahab wanted Naboth's vineyard and Naboth didn't want to sell it. Now it wasn't that Ahab didn't already have plenty of land, but he went into a sulk because he couldn't have this one piece. So, Jezebel had Naboth killed and Ahab got his vineyard.

In response, God sent Elijah, his prophet, to Ahab with a message of judgement. Here's part of what he said:

*"And also concerning Jezebel the LORD says: 'Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.'" 1 Kings 21:23*

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<sup>26</sup> 2 Kings 9:30-37



Years later, through Jehu, God acted on his promise and punished Jezebel for her sin.

So why is there suffering in the world? One reason is God's direct punishment for sin. The Bible teaches that clearly. Yet, we need to be very careful in making that connection.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001 I was sitting at my desk studying when I got a phone call. On the other end was a strained voice asking me, 'Have you seen what's happening?' 'No', I replied. 'Get to a TV quick,' he responded and then he hung up. When I got to the lounge there were already several people there glued to the images of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York City. The news reporter was telling us that a plane had just flown into them.

We then watched open-mouthed, not believing what we were seeing, as another plane headed towards the towers and hit, exploding as it did so. It was a day of shock, horror, grief and tears. In the days and weeks after, the world processed what had happened and as it did people began to talk about change, pain and also about God's judgement. Was this God's judgement on our material greed? Was this God's judgement on America or the West?

Now, from what we've seen, the Bible does open the door to see 9/11 in this way. It teaches us that God does step into time to punish sin. Yet, there is nothing in the Bible that tells us this is the only way to understand such an event. In fact, at times it rebukes us for jumping to that conclusion.<sup>27</sup> We are told about past events so that

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<sup>27</sup> cf. John 9:3

we can see the different reasons why God willed suffering. However, we are not given enough to make any authoritative statement about the absolute reasons for events in our time.

So yes, God does act to bring judgement on our sin. Sometimes the suffering that we experience in this life is as a direct result of the wrong that we have done. Yet, we need to be very careful and humble in drawing that conclusion. In many circumstances it simply isn't the case and to make the claim is to mis-represent God and has the potential to cause a huge amount of harm.

## 3

## Is it really that bad?

Imagine you were invited for pizza at someone's house. When you get there the pizza is still cooking so you're shown through to the lounge to wait. Time runs on and it's getting past your normal dinner time. Your stomach is beginning to rumble. At last the food is ready and you're called through. On the table are pizzas, garlic bread, salad and a few bowls of crisps.

You're hungry so what do you do? You haven't said grace yet, and others are still coming in, but you reach out and grab a crisp – just something to keep you going for the next few moments. The host sees you with the crisp half way to your mouth. There is a pause while you look at each other. Then he opens his mouth and resolutely, but quietly utters one word, 'Out!'

You half laugh, half stare, not believing that he means it. But he does. He comes over, takes your arm and marches you out of the house. All over a crisp! Really, isn't that a little too much? Isn't that an over-reaction?

I wonder sometimes whether we approach God's statements on sin in that way. Remember what God told Adam:

*"You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." Genesis 2:17*

Really! Surely, it's just a piece of fruit – so how can it be so bad?

Consider these words in Romans:

*For the wages of sin is death. Romans 6:23*

Notice, we're not told the wages of some sins, the really bad ones, is death. Similarly, we're not told the wages of many sins is death. As James points out:

*For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. James 2:10*

This verse tells us the wages of all and any sin is death.

These statements take on even greater significance when we understand death in its true biblical sense. Here it is not to be limited to the stopping of our bodily functions, but seen as an eternal concept. Ultimately, death in the Bible is to be under the eternal punishment of God and eternal separation from God.<sup>28</sup>

That's a really big punishment for even the smallest sin. Is sin really that bad? On the surface this can seem shocking. A little white lie – is it really worthy of hell? A slight flaring of temper – can that really deserve an eternity of separation from God? Yet, we see things a little bit differently when God removes the fences that contain sin and he lets it take its course.

In the film, 'Finding Nemo', we meet various sea creatures and birds. Some of my favourite are the sea gulls. I love the way that the animators have morphed their natural call into the word 'mine'. As

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<sup>28</sup> 2 Thessalonians 1:9, Revelation 20:14

they fly about anything they see is greeted with the cry, 'mine, mine, mine'. It's greed, but it seems harmless and more funny than serious.

The website famlii.com have produced, 'The Toddlers Rules of Possession', based on a poem by Dr Burton White.<sup>29</sup> In it we see the mentality of a toddler towards her toys or even anything she wants. 'MINE' is the repeated word, over and over. It hits the mark smack on. Toddlers don't like sharing and it can be amusing to see the lengths they will go to keep hold of their treasures. It's greed but it can seem cute to us as we watch on.

According to visionlaunch.com, 7.6 million people die from malnutrition each year.<sup>30</sup> That's 21 000 people per day. What's the cause of this? Clearly, there is a lack of food, but it is not a problem of amount, it is one of distribution.

In 2017, 1 billion tons of maize was harvested across the world. Now, not all maize goes for human food consumption, but for simplicity let's just imagine it did. That's the equivalent weight of 13 trillion boxes of cornflakes at 750g each. Let's break that down further, that's enough for each person in this world to have 3 ½ boxes of cornflakes per week. That's almost 4 large 100g portions of cornflakes per person, per day.

The maize crop is only one among many crops that are grown across the world each year. There is plenty of food available so why is it not

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.famlii.com/toddler-rules-of-possession-toddlers-creed/>

<sup>30</sup> <http://visionlaunch.com/many-people-die-malnutrition-year/>

distributed and shared with those in need? Greed. Greed that refuses to give. Greed that refuses to pay a fair wage so that workers can eat.

When we see this, we realise that greed is not a laughable matter. It is something that can have catastrophic consequences. If we lose sight of a giving God and grip things tightly, people's lives can be in the balance.

Or take pride. None of us likes to be told we're wrong. We all get a bit prickly when we're called out and flaws in our character are exposed. I can't tell you how many times I've had a 'great' idea for a sermon and shared it with Anita. Only to find that she doesn't share the excitement or, more to the point, is dubious that I've got the point of the passage. I have to admit I don't always receive that constructive criticism in the best possible way.

Everyone is the same though. Aren't they? Pride puts bumps in the roads of relationships, but is it really that bad?

The Bible tells us that the religious leaders of Jesus' day were proud people. They had their rules, their way of doing things and liked to be known as the spiritual ones.<sup>31</sup> How did Jesus approach them? He didn't hold back when he had the opportunity to show their hypocrisy.<sup>32</sup> He offended their pride. What was their response? They plotted to kill him.

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<sup>31</sup> Luke 18:11-12

<sup>32</sup> cf. Luke 6:37-54

At Jesus' trial, no evidence was presented that was consistent or compelling.<sup>33</sup> It was a false trial that was driven, not by a desire for justice, but through hatred caused by pride. When Pilate offered to release Jesus or Barabbas, Barabbas was chosen not because he was good man, but because of hatred for Jesus caused by pride.

At the cross there was no shame expressed by those whose actions had placed Jesus there. Think of it, Jesus had healed, helped, taught and loved those he'd come across, yet here the leaders laughed, mocked and poured insults on him.<sup>34</sup> Consider also who Jesus is. He is the God who had made them, had set Israel apart, had brought the nation out of Egypt, had given them so many blessings, yet here they are performing the ultimate act of rejection. It is a dreadful scene and at its heart is pride.

Sin is a terrible thing, no matter how small it appears in our eyes. A little lust, what harm is that? Jesus tells us that it's the same as adultery,<sup>35</sup> an act that tears families apart and leaves damage in its wake. A little anger directed at someone, maybe they don't even know, what could be wrong with that? Jesus tells us that in that attitude murder has been committed in the heart.<sup>36</sup>

Not all of the suffering that takes place in this world is directly caused by the sinful actions of people, but much is. Many atrocious acts take

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<sup>33</sup> Mark 14:56, 59

<sup>34</sup> Mark 15:31-32

<sup>35</sup> Matthew 5:28

<sup>36</sup> Matthew 5:22

place each day which cause harm and pain, often with catastrophic consequences.

How should we respond to this? We should weep. We should work to prevent them happening in the future. Yet, that's not all. We also need to see the lesson that they teach us.

As we observe the disturbing reality of sin we are brought face to face with and the damage that is caused when we turn from God's ways and take up our own. Without it, we'd probably be content in our 'little bit of naughtiness'.



## 4

## Surely, I can do anything?

I was eighteen and hadn't long got my first car. It was a silver mini, a classic. It isn't the safest, most powerful or largest car I've owned, but I'd say it was the most fun to drive. It was so low to the ground that going 30mph felt like I was going 60. On a dark rainy night, I was driving down a hill towards a left-hand bend under a railway bridge. I saw the puddle but thought nothing of it. Next thing I knew the car was spinning and eventually came to a stop facing the wall.

That was my first experience of aquaplaning. I hadn't appreciated before how dangerous a little water on the road can be. Roll forwards 22 years and my family and I are driving home from a few days break away in something a little bit bigger than a mini. On the motorway it begins to rain. Not just a gentle spit, this was torrential rain that turned the road into a river.

My mind goes back to that spin under the bridge. I'm remembering how easy it is to go from being in full control to no control at all. When the rain came, I took the necessary measures, slowed down, put on the lights etc, but really, I just wanted it to stop.

Yet, here's the problem. I couldn't do anything about it. I couldn't lessen the rain and I couldn't shift it over so that it was somewhere else. The only relief came as we passed under a bridge and the hammering sound on the roof dissipated albeit briefly. As we drove along, I was powerless to change what was happening.

The Bible teaches many things about human nature. It speaks about our dignity as those made in God's image.<sup>37</sup> In humanity, we see evidence of love, kindness, justice, bravery and strength – all characteristics to admire. The Bible speaks about the creativity and innovativeness that God has made us with.<sup>38</sup> It also reminds us of our weakness:

*for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.*  
*Psalm 103:14–16*

At the end of the day we are not infinite people with infinite power. We are finite people with limited power. Today and throughout history that is a perspective that we've struggled to grasp.

In the book of Obadiah God gives his prophet a message for the Kingdom of Edom. They have become a strong people and see themselves as invincible. This is what God says:

*"The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rocks and make your home on the heights, you who say to yourself, 'Who can bring me down to the ground?' Though you soar like the eagle and make your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down," declares the LORD. Obadiah 3–4*

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<sup>37</sup> Genesis 1:26. While the fall in Genesis 3 certainly taints this, it does not remove the identity of human beings as those made in God's image (cf. Genesis 9:6).

<sup>38</sup> Genesis 4:19-22

The people of Edom have lost sight of their weakness.

This isn't a unique problem and it's a temptation we face today. We live in a day of technological advancement. It's been almost 60 years since a man first stepped onto the moon. We can fly with ease around the world in just a few hours. With the rise of the internet I can be in touch with someone on the other side of the world in seconds and access my files and control my home from anywhere.

I used to dream at secondary school of a day when you might have a watch with a computer screen and today it's here. Smart phones, Smart watches and so many other gadgets enable us to do so much. Scientific and engineering ingenuity has been able to achieve so much. Surely, we can do anything, can't we?

It's only when we are brought face to face with a world that doesn't behave as we want it to that we are shaken out of this overly optimistic view of our power and abilities.

That was the case with King Nebuchadnezzar. He was the king of Babylon who conquered Judah.<sup>39</sup> He was a great and powerful king and thought of himself as invincible. One day he was looking over his city and patting himself on the back for all he had done. As he did this God spoke from heaven and stripped away his authority and position. Daniel tells us:

*He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven*

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<sup>39</sup> 2 Chronicles 36:15-21

*until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird. Daniel 4:33*

He was only restored when he turned to God and praised him. What was going on here? God was using an experience of suffering to remind King Nebuchadnezzar of his weakness and that only God is all powerful.

On my holidays from university I used to work on a farm. It was an interesting job, full of variety. If you'd told my younger self, brought up on the very urban fringes of London, that I would spend my summers driving tractors, fixing farm machinery, rounding up sheep, and looking after chickens I would never have believed you.

Each August the harvest would start. It would begin with the oats, then the wheat, then the oilseed rape and last would be the potatoes. Each year was a waiting game. We had to wait for the sunshine to ripen the crop and to give us the conditions to harvest. We looked at the forecasts, tried to plan, but found ourselves completely at the mercy of the elements, or to be more biblical, the mercy of God who holds the weather in his hands.

Each year as we went through this, I was reminded of our weakness. Although farming is changing and more and more technology is being used, the fundamental things – sunshine, rain, warmth and cold – are completely outside of our control. We need this reminder to stop us from becoming proud and seeing ourselves as stronger than we are.

When a storm strikes, what are we taught? We have the technology to predict when and where it might hit. Thank the Lord we can often tell early enough to put safety measures in place to limit casualties.

But we are powerless to move, alter or change the storm in any way. How different we are from God who holds these things in his hand.<sup>40</sup>

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of September 2018, the BBC reported that life expectancy in the UK had stopped improving for the first time since 1982.<sup>41</sup> Over the last few decades, huge advances have been made in the field of medicine. Our understanding of the human body, diseases and illnesses have taken a big step forward and our ability to treat them is increasing each day. Yet, we cannot stop death, we are powerless to prevent it. Again, how different we are from God.<sup>42</sup>

Suffering is a reminder of our weakness and helplessness in this world. It is a reminder of our need of God and of his mercy and grace. Without it we can so easily become proud with an over-inflated view of ourselves. It is a wakeup call of our need of God. Just think, when do most people pray? When things are going as they like, or in the helplessness of suffering?

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<sup>40</sup> Psalm 148:8

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-45638646>

<sup>42</sup> John 11:43-44, Mark 16:6



## 5

# Tasting the truth

One of the first things I do when I pick up my tablet in the morning is to check the news. I want to know what's been going on in the world while I've been asleep. Mostly, it is further comment on the news stories of yesterday, but sometimes it is something completely unexpected that shocks and grieves.

In August this year I had one of those moments. Monsoon rains had fallen across India causing massive flooding in Kerala State.<sup>43</sup> 73 people had already died, the actual figure would continue to rise over the coming days, and thousands had been displaced. How do you respond to news like that?

For me, there are three responses I tend to have. First, there is compassion for those affected by tragedy. Second, I pray for those affected and for the church in the area. Then third, I look to see if there's more information as I try to see why this may have happened.

What I don't tend to do very well is ask what this situation is teaching me. Yet, that is something that Jesus urges us to do whenever we see tragedy of any kind.

One day some people came to Jesus with news of two tragedies. The first was a political tragedy where Pilate had killed several Galileans

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<sup>43</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-45205516>

as they brought their sacrifices to the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>44</sup> The second involved the collapse of a tower which killed 18 in Siloam.<sup>45</sup> From Jesus' initial reply it seems that the people are assuming that those who died must have done some great sin; and they are asking Jesus to explain it to them.

Jesus does something completely different. He diverts their attention away from the victims of these two events and onto their own hearts, their own condition and how God should treat them. He answers:

*"Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." Luke 13:2–3*

Jesus' point is clear. When you see tragedy, before you start thinking of the blame game, examine your own heart and see the challenge in front of you. As a sinner, this is what you deserve.

I remember listening to a message that Voddie Baucham gave at a 'Desiring God' conference on truth in a post-modern world.<sup>46</sup> In it he talks about the big questions of life and gets to one of the biggest: 'What is wrong with the world?' Many people answer by pointing the finger at God.

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<sup>44</sup> Luke 13:1

<sup>45</sup> Luke 13:4

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-supremacy-of-christ-and-truth-in-a-postmodern-world>



Have you ever heard the classic question, ‘How can God be all good and all powerful and allow suffering in this world?’ The implication here is that the presence of suffering must mean that God falls short of who he says he is. It either means he is not all loving or he cannot be all powerful.

Baucham shares how he deals with that question when it’s raised by philosophy students. He begins by challenging the question itself:

**VB:** *I’m not going to answer the question until you ask it correctly*

**Student:** *What do you mean ask the question properly? You can’t tell me how to ask my question.*

When the time is right, he then explains the right question to ask:

*“Look me in my eyes and ask me this: ‘How on earth can a holy righteous God know what I did and thought and said yesterday and not kill me in my sleep last night?’ Ask it that way, and we can talk. But until you ask it that way, you do not understand the issue.”*

Now Baucham is engaging here with philosophy students and his directness might not be appropriate in every situation. But his point is. The problem with the world is not the deficiencies of God, but the sinfulness of our hearts. And, actually, the suffering that we experience is never more than we deserve. The presence and reality of suffering is a constant reminder of this.

Once we grasp this truth our perspective on life, the world and all that we see takes a dramatic shift. From a position where we see ourselves as innocents we cry out, ‘Why the suffering?’ From the

perspective of a sinner we cry out, 'Why so much good?' Yes, when we witness the suffering of others, we still ask 'why them?' But, equally as loud is 'why not me?'

What is the most shocking thing in our lives today? It is not the presence of suffering, no matter how small or great. It is that we are still breathing. It is that we still have communities and not complete anarchy. As we walk through life we still enjoy the beauties of creation, love in families, kindness in difficulties. There is still joy and pleasure to be known.

Then we look to the cross of Jesus. For people such as us what has God done? He sent his Son as a sin offering, so that through faith our sin might be forgiven, and we might be included in his family, as his loved children.

If we let it, suffering keeps us humble and reminds us of what we deserve. In our pride, it is something we need. In our hearts we see ourselves as innocent victims of the pain in the world. That colours our perspective on what we see. The message of suffering is something different. It is a reminder that we are sinners and do not deserve any of God's goodness. And so, it also points us to Jesus and reminds us of God's grace.

## 6

## Getting our attention

She wanted to run ahead. At first it was fine. It was a quiet street with no traffic. There were no hedges, so her dad could see if any cars were about to reverse out of the driveways across the footpath. But now, they were getting to the end of the street and the backdrop was about to change.

As they approached the main road, she quickened her pace, trying to get further in front. The lorries zoomed past ahead without a thought for the toddler approaching. The dad realised that now was the time to close the gap for her safety. So, he called out her name. She didn't turn her head, there was no acknowledgement.

All the time the road was getting closer. He called again, this time a little louder. Still no difference. He quickened his pace and called a third time, much louder now. She turned, smiled, but kept on going.

Now he was running. The gap closed, he grabbed her hand, turned her to face him and told her to slow down. She didn't like it; he could see the scream forming on her face, but now he had her attention and she was listening.

The Bible tells us that we are sinners. God has made us and the purpose for our existence is to glorify him. Yet, we have thrown off God's design, rebelled against his rule and chosen to go our own way. We each put our unique twist on this, but at heart we are all the

same. As a result, we live a life separated from God and are running quickly towards the consequences of his judgement.

The Bible also tells us how God views this. He is not revealed to us as someone wringing his hands in glee, impatiently waiting till that day. No, as Peter tells us:

*He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish,  
but everyone to come to repentance. 2 Peter 3:9*

God is patient with us in our sin and desires for people to turn to him and receive his forgiveness.

We see this patience throughout God's dealings with humanity. We see it directly after the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Genesis 3. God doesn't immediately dispense with the human race. Instead he is patient, giving opportunity for repentance. That patience is not short-lived either. We are still here today, many thousands of years later.

We see God's grace to a sinful humanity shown in the cross of Jesus. On a day when our rebellion against God reached its ugly heights, God's love was clearly demonstrated to us.<sup>47</sup> Does God want people to be saved? To answer that question all we need to do is look at the cross. There he gave his Son to die in our place, to pay for our sins, so that a way could be opened up to him.

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<sup>47</sup> Romans 5:8

God's mercy does not end there. He has not only provided a way to be saved from our sin, he is also telling people about it day after day. Part of the message is seen in the creation around us:

*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. Romans 1:20*

As we look around us, what are we supposed to see? Something of the nature and character of the God who made it.

I've always been fascinated by the dimensions of the space around us. The sun is almost 93 million miles from the earth. If we built a motorway to the sun do you know how many years it would take to get there driving at 70mph? If you don't want to work it out, the answer is 151.

If we then go to the next nearest star, Proxima Centauri, what then? Proxima Centauri is 4.24 light years from earth. That's approximately 24,925,000,000,000 miles. In our car, driving at 70mph we would take over 40 million years to get there. The scary thing is that if we did, we would have only taken one small step on the journey across the universe. When we see this, what are we supposed to understand? The awesome greatness and power of God.

It's not just the scale of the creation that staggers, but so do the intricacies. The bee hummingbird is the world's smallest bird. The males are smaller than the females and weigh an average of 1.96g, just over half the weight of a penny, and measure 5.5cm long. Into

that tiny frame are squeezed more than 900 perfectly formed feathers.<sup>48</sup>

These tiny birds can fly at 25-35 mph and their heart beats at the phenomenal rate of 1200 times per minute.<sup>49</sup> When we see the intricacies of these creatures, and many others even smaller, what are we supposed to recognise? The wisdom and glory of a creator God.

Now, this isn't the whole of God's message, but it is the start. Unless we first understand that there is a God, sin, salvation and repentance make no sense.

God hasn't only given us a message in the creation around us. He has also given us the Bible. The Bible is no ordinary book. It isn't a book of human thinking, but one of divine revelation.<sup>50</sup> In it, God tells us the origin of life and the reality of sin; and principally he focuses us on the provision of his Son to be the saviour of the world. There are some parts which are hard to understand,<sup>51</sup> but its message is clear.

In 2017 the whole Bible was available in 670 different languages. The New Testament had been printed in 1521 languages and there were 3312 languages with translations of at least part of the Bible.<sup>52</sup> There is still a long way to go before everyone has access to the Bible in their first language. But these figures mean that, by God's grace, 80%

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<sup>48</sup> <https://animals.mom.me/hummingbird-feathers-5880.html>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.beautyofbirds.com/beehummingbirdfacts.html>

<sup>50</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16

<sup>51</sup> 2 Peter 3:16

<sup>52</sup> Taken from statistics published by Wycliffe Global Alliance  
<http://www.wycliffe.net/statistics>

of the world's population have the whole Bible and over 90% have the New Testament. That's a lot of people who can read or hear the message of God.

Yet, this is still not all. God has given the world his church. They are the

*pillar and foundation of the truth. 1 Timothy 3:15*

They are his people here on earth who are tasked with telling the world about Jesus and issuing God's call to be reconciled to him through repentance and faith.<sup>53</sup> They are those who demonstrate the reality of God's forgiveness to the world around them. Through the church his message is spoken and shown.

God's mercy is clearly seen day by day as his message is broadcast around the world. But here's the thing. It is being broadcast to a people that aren't paying attention.

As we look around us, we are blind to the message of the creator. We have made up our own stories that drown out the truth in our minds. The Bible is the message of Jesus Christ. Yet, how often and in how many places is it actually opened? And when it is, is it read as the book God intended it to be?

Then there's the church. Even where we find the church true to the Gospel and walking with Jesus, there is an apathy to her message, a feeling that she is irrelevant.

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<sup>53</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:20

How does a God who cares about this world and the people who are heading towards judgement (remember the little girl at the beginning of the chapter) get our attention? One of his tools is the tool of suffering.

Revelation 16 contains a vision God gave about seven bowls of God's wrath. The last of these bowls signifies the final judgement of God on the world. The other six speak of God's judgements on the world between the cross and the return of Jesus.

After the description of the fourth judgement, this is the reflection on the state of the hearts of the people:

*but they refused to repent and glorify him. Revelation 16:9*

It's not an accident for it is repeated after the fifth as well:

*but they refused to repent of what they had done. Revelation 16:11*

The judgements described are not matters to laugh at. The pain and agony they describe is hard to take in; and, if I'm honest, these are verses that I often want to pass over. Yet, God is clear. His purpose in judging is not only to pour out his wrath on sin, but also to get people's attention, giving them an opportunity to repent.

Imagine you've gone to visit someone at their home. You get to the door and find there is no doorbell. You're going to have to knock. You're polite so you knock quietly to begin with. No answer. You knock a little louder, still no answer. You know they are in, so what do you do? You knock louder and louder until you get their attention.



In suffering, God is knocking on the door of our lives, getting our attention so that we might listen to his message – a message of who he is and who we are, the reality of our sin and the glorious provision of a saviour. A simple call: repent, believe and be saved.



# 7

## So why?

When someone asks the 'why' question about suffering they are generally being specific. They want to know the reasons behind the particular situation or action that is concerning them at that time. I know I've said the same thing earlier, but it's worth repeating; the Bible doesn't give a grid to figure this out.

When it comes to suffering there is a lot that the Bible doesn't tell us. There are lots of unanswered questions, lots of hidden reasons. If this is the case, what's the point of asking the question and what's the point of the last few chapters which tried to answer it?

The purpose has been to build a biblical framework that will help us to trust God as we see suffering in the world around us. There are reasons for suffering in this world. These are not random events; they are not all too frequent blips on the terrain of existence. Each has a purpose and a place. It is not just that God is in control, but he has a reason for the things he does. We might not know the answer to our 'why' question, but we can know that there is an answer.

More importantly, if we look at these reasons, we see that they are not the reasons of evil cruelty. God is not a sadist or masochist in permitting and willing suffering in his world. His reasons are reasons of righteousness, holiness, love, mercy, grace and compassion for people who have rebelled against him and he desires to save. His reasons fit with his glorious and perfect character.

So why is this world a place of suffering? It is not because God is an out-of-control, temper-strewn God who is angrily and mindlessly toying with this world. It is the plan and purpose of a holy, loving, merciful and gracious God who hates sin and is giving people the opportunity to turn to him and join him in eternity. I don't understand it, I don't have to, but I can trust God in it.

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those  
who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.  
Romans 8:28*



## Part 3

# Answers for a groaning church

On March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2018, the *Telegraph* reported that Ashya King, an eight-year-old boy had been cleared of cancer.<sup>54</sup> In August 2014, he had been awaiting a course of chemotherapy and radiotherapy when his parents ‘abducted’ him from hospital in Southampton and fled to Europe. They ended up being arrested and imprisoned for 72 hours on charges of child cruelty.

Now this wasn’t a simple case. There were fears of side effects, pioneering treatments and religious beliefs at play. At its heart, though, this is a story of parents willing to do whatever it took for their child to get better, to be healthy and live a ‘good’ life. Isn’t that what parents are supposed to do?

So why does God permit and will suffering in his church? Remember what we’ve already seen. God is in control of all things and no evil or suffering of any kind can exist outside of his will and permission. This is true for suffering generally in the world and it is true for suffering in the lives of Christians.

We’ve seen some reasons why God may will suffering in the world, but the church is not the world. The world is a place under the curse and a people in rebellion against God. The church is those saved by

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<sup>54</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/03/03/ashya-king-cleared-cancer-three-years-parents-abducted-hospital/>

God's grace and who are now his children. And aren't parents supposed to do all that they can to prevent their children from suffering?

So why is there suffering in the church? Why do Christians suffer? Why doesn't God protect and deliver his children from these things? Listen to the answer the Bible gives:

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28*

This is a promise from God that covers any and every situation, including suffering. What does it tell us? God wills suffering for his children for their good.

In the next chapters we will look at some of the 'good' that God works in his people through suffering. It isn't an exhaustive list, but hopefully it is enough for us to see the reality of this promise and to see that we can rest on it in the confusion of the pain.



# 1

## Changed for good

I'm easily the worst artist in our family. For some reason there is a blockage in the communication between my brain and my hands and fingers. In my head a masterpiece is being developed, but the paper tells a different story.

At school we only had to do art for half of the year. The other half we did pottery instead. Although I was only marginally better at pottery than art, I did enjoy it. There was something about getting my hands dirty, the feel of the clay and transforming a shapeless lump into something meaningful that brought a certain satisfaction.

When someone becomes a Christian, two things happen. First, they are saved totally and completely. They are forgiven, made right with God, reconciled to him, adopted as his child and sealed by the Holy Spirit who guarantees their place in eternity.<sup>55</sup> That's not the whole picture though. On that day they begin a journey of change. Day by day they are called to put off the old self and put on the things of Christ through the power that God provides by his Spirit.<sup>56</sup>

It's this journey of change that Paul speaks about in the book of Romans directly after making the promise:

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<sup>55</sup> Ephesians 1:3-14

<sup>56</sup> Colossians 3:5-14; Philippians 2:13

*in all things God works for the good of those who love him. Romans 8:28*

The reason he gives is this:

*For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. Romans 8:29*

The promise of good is not a promise of ease or comfort. It is not a promise of fulfilled desire or deliverance from every difficulty. It is a promise that in all things, whatever they are, God is at work to make us more like Jesus.

When I look back on my pottery lessons, I can remember some of the techniques we used. Some of them were gentle and others were much harder. Sometimes we had to cut, squash, pull or press the clay. Without this it wouldn't shape the right way. It's the same with us. Sometimes we can be shaped gently, and at other times more extreme measures are needed.

One of the most shocking passages in the Bible is James 1:2-4. Look at the opening words:

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.*

Many years ago, I purchased a Graham Kendrick album. In it he had a song based on these words. My first thought when I listened was, 'Really? That can't be right.' I couldn't believe the words he'd written. Mentally I made the decision that I wouldn't listen to that song. Then I discovered the words weren't his, they were God's.

James continues,

*because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. James 1:3–4*

These are really important words because they explain the joy. We are not to consider trials pure joy because they are painful and hard, but because of what God is achieving through them. Through the trials of life, God is maturing us as his people and making us more like Jesus.

How does this work? Let me mention three ways.

### **Sin revealed**

As a father I've experienced so much joy. I have been showered again and again with undeserved love and had the privilege of sharing in so many significant occasions. I remember seeing first steps, hearing first words and have been part of the journey of life as my children have grown.

It has also had its testing times as well. There are the normal difficulties: sleepless nights, unending need and desire for your attention and disobedience. Then, there are the out-of-the-ordinary moments like late-night visits to the hospital fuelled with panic and concern because something is clearly wrong.

When things are going well, I feel good about myself. Look at the job I'm doing, look how my children are turning out. When things get a bit harder it's amazing how quickly that changes. I remember one occasion when I was lying on a cot bed in the hospital. My arm was uncomfortably twisted upwards because my son was too scared to

sleep and needed to hold my hand. I didn't feel a model of selfless love as I complained inside.

Whenever I have had to walk a path of struggle, I have found sin exposed. It's when things don't happen as we would like that we see the rebellion of our heart, our pride, our selfishness, our wilfulness. To grow, we need to put sin to death.<sup>57</sup> If we are to do this, sin needs to be exposed and God so often does that through trials.

### **Character workout**

I spent part of my time at university in the USA at the University of North Texas. While there, I took up running. Several mornings each week I would join up with some members of the athletics team and we'd take in a few miles. For them, it was their warm-up for the day. For me, it was a good day if I could still stand upright by the end.

I learned an important lesson on those mornings. If you don't push, then you don't improve. Going longer builds stamina; going faster builds speed and strength.

In the book of Galatians, we see the characteristics that God, by his Spirit, is building in all of his people:

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Galatians 5:22–23*

How do these grow? By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can't forget that, but we need to remember we are not passive participants in

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<sup>57</sup> Romans 8:13

this growth. Think back to James 1:2-4 quoted above. The fruits of the Spirit grow as they are exercised in our lives and that is linked to the sufferings we go through.

Waiting is hard, particularly in our instant society. Recently, Amazon offered me a one-month free trial of their Prime programme. There were many benefits, not least being free next day delivery. It was great, click one day and everything we'd ordered was there by the end of the next day. It was hard, though, when the trial was over and we had cancelled the subscription. Four to five days can seem a long time to wait for a DVD, a book or whatever it is you've ordered.

How do we learn patience? Not by having everything given to us the instant we ask, or even before we ask. We learn patience by having to wait for things. We learn patience in the physical agony as we wait for a date for an operation. We learn patience as we pray for change, but God delays. We learn patience when the child's challenging behaviour doesn't respond immediately to their parents' discipline.

Or take love, for instance. It's easy to love someone who always does what you want. It's easy to love someone who is quiet when you need quiet, talkative when you want someone to talk to, whose very existence is set up around your pleasure. But that's not really love is it? Love is giving and taking. Love is about serving others, not just being served. Love is about sacrifice for people's good, not making people fit your pattern. Listen to these words in John's first letter:

*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. 1 John 3:16*

How do we grow in this kind of love? We grow as we are stretched in harder and harder situations. We grow in the exhaustion of parenthood as the baby cries, again, at 2:00 in the morning needing our attention. We grow as we sit by the bedside of one we love, steadily giving more and more to help them through their suffering.

We grow as we love people by letting them love us in our suffering. In my experience one of the hardest things about suffering is admitting we need help and accepting that help. Remember the words of Jesus:

*"It is more blessed to give than to receive." Acts 20:35*

We can love people by swallowing our pride and allowing them the opportunity to give in our lives, not just in the lives of others.

### **Faith refining**

In our garden we have a pyracantha growing up against our fence. It's a great plant for covering up an otherwise drab boundary, but beware, it's equipped with a full armoury of thorns. Last year I had to run some cables around the edge of the garden. That meant getting up close and personal with the beast. I did it, but only after feeling the full force of the thorns in my flesh.

Paul uses that picture in 2 Corinthians to describe suffering that he is enduring. He tells us:

*there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 2 Corinthians 12:7*

He writes that God has sent this suffering to prevent him from being proud because of certain visions that he had received. But that's not

all. He also tells us of a promise that he received as he prayed for this suffering to be removed:

*But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." 2 Corinthians 12:9*

I remember my mum purchasing an old-fashioned kitchen scale. It had a bowl on one side in which you put the ingredient you were weighing, and on the other side it had a plate where you could add the weights. When the scales were balanced you knew that the amount in the bowl was the same as the weights on the plate.

That's is a helpful picture for understanding this promise. God is saying that no matter how hard the situation is in life, it is balanced, or more than balanced, by God's grace available to us.

The promises of God, however, are not only there for us to read and understand. They are there to believe. So how do we believe them more and more? By being taken to harder and harder places and discovering that they are true. By going through circumstances that require more and more grace and discovering that God's grace is enough for us.

Corrie Ten Boom's story has been told in her book *The Hiding Place*. During the second world war her family were living in Holland. They used their home as a refuge for many Jews and helped many at great risk to themselves. They were eventually caught and imprisoned and her parents and sister were killed. What did she learn during this? This is one of her most famous quotes:

*You may never know that Jesus is all you need, until  
Jesus is all you have.<sup>58</sup>*

Peter writes his first letter to Christians who are suffering. Near the beginning he gives them an explanation of their trials:

*These have come so that your faith—of greater worth  
than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—  
may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory  
and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 1 Peter 1:7*

So how should we approach suffering as Christians? I don't think the Bible ever encourages us to get excited about pain or to want hardship for the sake of difficulty. But we are to welcome them with faith and expectancy, looking to what God will do for us in and through those hardships. As Paul writes:

*we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that  
suffering produces perseverance; perseverance,  
character; and character, hope. Romans 5:3–4*

Rejoicing, not because they are hard, but because in them our Father in heaven is moulding us into the image of Jesus.

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<sup>58</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/374714-you-may-never-know-that-jesus-is-all-you-need>



## 2

# Fatherly discipline

Discipline is a bigger word than we normally think it is. So often we hear the word and immediately think ‘telling off’, ‘naughty step’, ‘being grounded’ or, more controversial in our day, ‘smacking’. However, discipline in the Bible is not just about correcting bad behaviour, it is about forming good behaviour.

The Greek word that is translated ‘discipline’ in the New Testament is the word *‘paideia’*. It means:

*to provide instruction, with the intent of forming proper habits of behaviour — ‘to teach, to instruct, to train, teaching, instruction.’<sup>59</sup>*

This is important to remember when we come across the word in the New Testament. As God disciplines, he is not seeking to exact legal payment for sin. For the Christian this has already happened on the cross. God is a Father training his children to walk in righteousness.<sup>60</sup>

How does God do this? The writer to the Hebrews tells us – through suffering and difficulties in our lives.

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<sup>59</sup> Louw, J & Nida, E. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, UBS, 1989.

<sup>60</sup> Hebrews 12:11

*Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?  
Hebrews 12:7*

We've seen the positive side of this in the previous chapter. God uses the hardships in our life to develop a Christ-like heart within us. Here I want to look at the negative side of this process. God disciplines through suffering to show us the wrongness of our sin and cause us to want to change.

The first readers of the letter of Hebrews were suffering. They were facing persecution for their faith and pressure to return to their old beliefs.<sup>61</sup> As they receive the letter it appears that they are tempted to give up, to throw off the hardships and seek an easier path.<sup>62</sup> The book contains many encouragements as it shows the supremacy, the gift and the example of Christ. Among them is this one:

*And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."  
Hebrews 12:5–6*

First, note why God disciplines Christians. He does it because they are his children and he loves them. These are precious gospel realities. The Bible tells us that God has loved his people from before the creation of the world.<sup>63</sup> That love was displayed most clearly at the

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<sup>61</sup> Hebrews 10:32-33

<sup>62</sup> Hebrews 12:4

<sup>63</sup> Ephesians 1:4-5

cross and has continued as he has pursued and drawn them to him through faith.<sup>64</sup> That love continues today as he disciplines them.

Note too that as the writer to the Hebrews encourages them with this truth, he does not only have the positive side of discipline in view. The parent who loves his children does not only show and teach a good example, he also brings appropriate punishment where that is necessary. As the proverb puts it:

*He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him. Proverbs 13:24*

Anita and I had taken our daughter on a shopping trip to the local city. It wasn't going to be a long trip, so we'd left the pushchair at home. We parked the car and headed for the main street. It wasn't long before she decided she didn't want to walk or be carried or comply with anything that would have made the shopping trip go smoothly. Instead, she had a complete meltdown in anger at her horrible parents who had dared to take her on this shopping trip.

Anita did the shopping while I sat on a bench with an out-of-control toddler for the next 20 minutes trying to calm her down. Now what is the loving response to that situation? Is it loving to ignore or to deal with it? Is it loving to encourage or discourage this behaviour? Because I love my daughter, I dealt with it. I tried to do it in a way that was helpful, a way that worked for her; this wasn't about me paying her back. But, I did deal with it.

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<sup>64</sup> 1 John 4:10; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5

It is loving to say 'no' where something is wrong. It is loving to add to that 'no' a suitable punishment for wrongdoing that shows clearly that this is not something that should be done. It is loving to set in place deterrents to provide a spur not to do it again. Wrong behaviour causes harm, harm to child themselves and harm to others, and the parent who loves their children will want to steer them away from that.

Remember, this isn't everything a loving parent will want to do in disciplining their child. They will want to shape positively, encourage that which is good to blossom and, more importantly, touch the heart. However, boundaries, correction and punishment are a part of loving discipline.

The Bible is clear that God uses suffering to train us in righteousness, but also to correct and challenge us in our sinfulness. In the book of Acts, we read about a couple called Ananias and Sapphira. They sold a piece of land and brought some of the money to the church leaders in Jerusalem as an offering. Sounds good so far. The problem was they lied. They only brought some of the money, but said they'd brought it all. They lied to make themselves look good.

What happened next? The Bible tells us that Ananias and Sapphira were struck down by God.<sup>65</sup> They ended up dead and buried. Why? God brought this on them because of their sinful act as a warning to the church and a challenge to everyone who saw and heard.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Acts 5:1-11

<sup>66</sup> Acts 5:5

In another church, the church in Corinth, the people were regularly meeting together and sharing communion. They were doing this in a divisive way. The rich were piling in the food and guzzling down the drink. The poor were left on the side-lines. This wasn't right.

At the same time, some in the church were getting sick; a few were even dying. Paul connects the two:

*That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. 1 Corinthians 11:30*

God was disciplining the Christians in Corinth because of their sinful acts.

What do we see here? God is a Father who loves his children. When they go wrong, he will do what is needed to challenge, to correct and to prevent.

Let's be clear, that does not mean that the presence of suffering in a Christian's life equates to the presence of some great sin. We must take care in how we apply this as an explanation of the suffering a Christian is undergoing. We do great harm if we begin pointing the finger of accusation and go looking for the sin that explains the pain.

There are many different answers that the Bible gives to the presence of suffering in the lives of God's children. Sometimes, not all the time, the suffering that we experience as God's people in this life is as a direct result of the wrong that we have done.



# 3

## Going deeper

On July 30<sup>th</sup> 1967, Joni Eareckson Tada's life dramatically changed. She was an active teenager until she dove into Chesapeake Bay, misjudging the depth of the water. The result, a fracture to her spine which left her paralysed from the shoulders down.

Reflecting on this 50 years later she writes about a lesson a friend taught her near the beginning:

*Back in the '70s, my Bible study friend Steve Estes shared ten little words that set the course for my life: "God permits what he hates to accomplish what he loves."<sup>67</sup>*

Her friend showed her that this was true of the cross of Jesus and was also true of her spinal cord injury. Her story is a testimony of the good things that God has accomplished through the tragedy of her accident.

Many people have been touched by the story of her life. Much ministry has been accomplished. Yet, the thing that stands out to me is Joni's testimony of the work that God has done in her heart, principally the way she has got to know Jesus. She says:

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<sup>67</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/reflections-on-50th-anniversary-of-my-diving-accident/>

*It is such a safe wonderful thing to be back in the inner sanctum of the fellowship of sharing in Your sufferings. And I would not trade it for any amount of walking.<sup>68</sup>*

The driving heart of all she does is this:

*Because Jesus is ecstasy beyond compare, and it's worth anything to be his friend.<sup>69</sup>*

A lesson learned and a truth experienced in the furnace of suffering.

In the book of Philippians, Paul shares his religious heritage.<sup>70</sup> From the outside he was quite somebody. He came from the right family, had the right background, did the right things and had kept the right rules. If God was pleased with anyone, surely it was Paul? Or was it?

Paul had come to realise that when it came to being right with God none of those things mattered. Nobody was good enough to make the grade.<sup>71</sup> Something different was needed. He had found the answer in Jesus. He'd turned his back on seeking acceptance through his heritage and through his works; he'd turned away from seeking salvation in anything else and put his faith in Jesus, the one who could make him right with God.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/TM13-2/a-deeper-healing>

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/reflections-on-50th-anniversary-of-my-diving-accident/>

<sup>70</sup> Philippians 3:4-6

<sup>71</sup> Romans 3:23

<sup>72</sup> Philippians 3:7-9



This new life came with new aims. His heart's desire was no longer to progress in the pharisaic tradition, but to know Christ.<sup>73</sup> The interesting thing is how he says that will happen. We know that the Bible is a book about Jesus. If we want to know him better, we need to take in the Bible's words, understand them and grasp them.<sup>74</sup>

Yet, here Paul takes a step further. He doesn't talk about reading and learning, but about experiencing and embedding these truths in our heart. Jesus is alive and so Paul wants to know that day by day in the reality of his life.

So how does this happen? First, as we experience his resurrection power.<sup>75</sup> The Bible tells us that when we become Christians God is at work in us with mighty power.<sup>76</sup> Now, our first thought here is often to think about great miracles and the like. Yes, God does perform miracles, but his power is at work doing something much bigger than that. He is at work in power to help us defeat sin, keep us going in our faith and protecting us from attack.<sup>77</sup>

As Paul walks in the reality of the power of Christ working in him through the Holy Spirit, the truths he knows become truths he experiences. The Saviour he reads of becomes the Saviour he walks with and the result – he knows him better.

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<sup>73</sup> Philippians 3:10

<sup>74</sup> This is the heart of Paul's prayer for the Ephesians in Ephesians 1:17, that they would know Jesus better as the Spirit revealed the things of Christ to them.

<sup>75</sup> Philippians 3:10

<sup>76</sup> Ephesians 1:18-19, Ephesians 3:20

<sup>77</sup> Romans 8:11; Colossians 1:11; Romans 8:31

There is another way that ‘knowing Christ’ happens – as we fellowship with Jesus in our suffering.<sup>78</sup>

Paul Mallard speaks of a particular night in his life as:

*The worst night – and the best night.*<sup>79</sup>

His wife was desperately ill in hospital and he had just been told that it was unlikely that she would get better. He is honest as he shares how alone he felt and the questions he asked:

*I felt neglected and forsaken by God. Did he care? Did he even know about our circumstances?*<sup>80</sup>

After a couple of hours of wrestling he tells us God spoke. Not audibly, but by reminding him of the line of a Psalm:

*As for God, his way is perfect. Psalm 18:30*

As he took it in, the frustration was replaced with peace and he writes:

*I found myself praising God for his goodness as I was filled with a new sense of confidence and joy.*<sup>81</sup>

In the depths of his suffering he had found fellowship with Christ. His relationship with Jesus had deepened.

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<sup>78</sup> Philippians 3:10

<sup>79</sup> Mallard, P. *Invest your suffering*, p 65, IVP, 2013.

<sup>80</sup> *Invest your suffering*, p 66.

<sup>81</sup> *Invest your suffering*, p 67.

Many of the Psalms were written during times of trial. Psalm 13 is one of them. It is a short psalm, but is full of honest questions and doesn't shy away from the reality of suffering:

*How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Psalm 13:2*

Yet, this is not a rant against God, it is an encouragement not to become bitter towards God. It is a spur to bring our sorrows to the Lord, to cry out to him. Why? Because as we do, we discover he is there with us in the suffering. We can know his love, strength, faithfulness and goodness upholding us even in the pit. Here is how it ends:

*I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me.  
Psalm 13:6*

Over and over the Bible teaches us that when we suffer and turn to him, he is there and will uphold, help and draw near to us.

I remember the day well. We had found out a few weeks earlier that Anita was pregnant and were just about to have our first scan when it became clear that everything wasn't going to plan. That night she miscarried, and we'd spent the day in the hospital having lost our first child.

We had names picked, we had plans made and now nothing. We had just lost a child whom we had never held and never met. That afternoon when we got home, I needed to go out. My head was spinning, and I didn't know what to think. As I walked, I prayed. I asked all sorts of questions and then this verse came into my head:

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28*

It didn't answer my questions but as I ran the verse over in my mind God reminded me of his love for his people, his love for me. I didn't know why we'd lost our child, but I knew that God was in control, this was for good and he loved me more than I could possibly know. That happened several years ago, but I can still say I knew God's love for me on that day more keenly than on any day previously.

It doesn't make sense to write that in isolation. The day we lost our child was the day I knew God's love more than any other. What a strange thing to say. The reason is, in the suffering and as I brought it to him, I had fellowship with Jesus. Through it I knew him better.

## 4

# Preparation

In his book, *When Darkness Seems My Closest Friend*, Mark Meynell, a former staff member at All Souls, Langham Place, speaks with candid honesty about his depression. Near the end he asks whether someone with mental health problems should be appointed to church ministry. He raises cautions, he calls for honesty, but he sees no reason why not. Here is his own experience:

*Depression was a catalyst for changes in my ministry, but emphatically not an obstacle to my ministry.<sup>82</sup>*

Later he writes about the importance of weakness in ministry:

*The importance is simple – leaders who limp are those who are weak and know it, but are not threatened by it. They have no alternative **but** to trust God.<sup>83</sup>*

For Meynell his depression is his weakness. It is what throws him constantly upon God, looking to his strength and help. It is the thing that reminds him that he cannot take credit for whatever good is happening through him.

Unless we know weakness, we will rely on ourselves in ministry. We will take the credit and seek to do the things that only God can do. It is a vital part of the preparation for ministry.

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<sup>82</sup> Meynell, M. *When Darkness Seems my Closest Friend*, IVP, 2018, p. 167.

<sup>83</sup> *When Darkness Seems my Closest Friend*, p 179.

That's not all. Weakness also brings empathy. If we want to love people through their hurting, encourage people in their pain and be gentle even where hard words must be spoken, we need to be able to put ourselves in their shoes. If we don't know weakness, then that is hard, if not impossible. Knowing brokenness is an important part of understanding brokenness.

As we look at the Bible, knowing weakness is a pre-requisite for ministry in the kingdom of God. Before Peter could take his place as the 'Apostle to the Jews' he had to first visit the depths of denying Jesus three times as Jesus walked to the cross. For Paul to receive the great visions of God's kingdom and preach them to the world around him, he had to bear his 'thorn in the flesh'. God's power is not displayed in our strength. As Jesus says:

*My power is made perfect in weakness. 2 Corinthians  
12:8*

We've already seen that suffering exposes our weakness.<sup>84</sup> It reminds us that we are not all-powerful, that we need God and must rely on him. This is not only a lesson that God teaches the world through suffering, but one that he teaches his people too. It is one that is vital for ministry.

The connection between suffering and ministry doesn't end here. Paul writes:

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus  
Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all  
comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we*

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<sup>84</sup> See Part 2, Chapter 4

*can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. 2 Corinthians 1:3–4*

In these words, we are told there is a direct link between suffering and ministry. Or more to the point, between the comfort that God gives us as we suffer and our ministry. As those who have suffered and known God's comfort, Paul says, we are enabled to minister to others who suffer. How does this work?

First of all, we can be a beacon of hope. As a teenager I belonged to a Scout Group. Each year we would take part in a competition pitting our skills and abilities against rival troops across the county. One of these involved a series of man-made tunnels – muddy, small and narrow ones. We had to get our team through in the quickest time that we could.

For me, being a touch claustrophobic, this is the sort of thing that nightmares are made of. As I got down on my knees and began to squeeze into the tunnels what did I focus on? The knowledge that there was a way out at the end.

In my experience this is something that makes such a difference in the tunnel of suffering. Hope so often gets consumed in despair. The painful circumstances fill the vision and it appears there is no way to look past it. A fellow sufferer who has known the comfort of God paints a different picture. As someone who has been strengthened and helped by God, they can show hope in a dark place.

When I minister out of a place of suffering, I minister as evidence of God's compassion and kindness, of his sufficiency to bring us through. As I speak the words of the Bible they are amplified through

the experience and reality of my life. There is something very compelling about that.

Hope is not the only part of the comfort ministry Paul speaks about in these verses. He is very particular:

*we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort  
we ourselves have received from God. 2 Corinthians 1:4*

Here, the way we comfort is not only showing there is a way through the suffering, but by helping people to come to the same place we have known, the place where they are comforted by God.

What is the comfort we have been given in these verses? It is comfort from God. How do we comfort others with this? Do we try to become the comfort they need? No, that's not enough. We need to point them to the one whose comfort is enough for our suffering.

What is the heart of biblical comfort ministry? It isn't us, it's God. It isn't our words, it's God's words. If we have walked through the path of suffering and known God's comfort, we should have learned that lesson. That's the big reality that equips us to minister.

Don't get me wrong. God uses people in this work. They are his arms and hands to show his care. They are his mouthpiece to remind us and teach us of his wonderful promises. But ultimately, comfort is found not in the people around you, but in God himself. It is found in who he is, the promises he has made and the comfort of his presence with us.

As we minister to hurting people, we are not only to share that there is a way through. We are to share that God is the one who is able to



bring you through. To know this, to have experienced this, to be able to do this with any sense of authority, we need to have suffered.

Steve Saint was only four years old when his father, a missionary, was killed by the people he was trying to talk to about Jesus. Many years later Steve and his wife were throwing a welcome home party for their daughter who had been away on mission for a year. That evening she complained of a headache and asked for prayer. While Steve prayed for her, she had a cerebral hemorrhage, was rushed to hospital and tragically died. He is a man who has known suffering and helped many who have suffered. Here is his conclusion on the connection between suffering and ministry:

*If we are going to emulate our Savior, we have to identify with the people to whom we take his good news. I don't advocate that we look for suffering; life brings enough of it on its own. But what I do advocate is that suffering is an important prerequisite to ministering to hurting people.<sup>85</sup>*

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<sup>85</sup> Ed. Piper, J & Taylor, J. *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, Crossway, 2006, p. 121.



## 5

# Pulling tent pegs

We watched the clouds gather in front of us. We were walking in Austria and the sun was shining. But just a few miles away the story was different. A storm had formed where the valleys met, just where our campsite was.

When we got back, the clear-up had already begun. Anything loose had been blown away. Anything tied down had received a battering. One of our group had stayed behind and had feared the tent would take off. It didn't, the pegs held.

The Bible teaches us that Christians shouldn't be too attached to this world. It is the place where we live, but it isn't our home.<sup>86</sup> It is the theatre of our lives, but it shouldn't captivate our hearts.<sup>87</sup> It is the breath before the music starts.

Yet, so often we see things the other way around. Our hearts are captivated with life now and little is thought of eternity. Our investments are in things that pay immediate dividends, rather than those that pay eternal ones. Our eyes are set on maxing out in the here and now, not the ever after.

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<sup>86</sup> Philippians 3:20

<sup>87</sup> Matthew 6:19-20

I find this a challenge as I look at my life and think about the desires of my heart. As a child growing up what were my aims? Honestly, to get married, have a family, work a job that's well paid, buy a house, have a sporty car and have lots of gadgets. Apart from the car, I'm there, I'm living the dream.

But here's the problem. None of those things are bad or wrong. But should they be the dream? My daily struggle is not the fact that these things are part of my life, but that I look to them to bring me satisfaction. Too often, my eyes are taken off my true home and set on the temporal home.

An eternal perspective should permeate my marriage and family life. It should be present in the way I handle my property, spend my money and fill my time. Yet, I find myself so often pegged into this world, held fast and unmovable.

All the time I need God to be pulling out the pegs that hold me down so my eyes can be lifted up. I need the grip of this world loosened. How does God do that? By showing us the glory of eternity (more on that later) and also through suffering.

As we look at the letters of Paul in the New Testament, we find somebody who has his vision full of eternity. He is always looking forward, working towards and investing in the everlasting kingdom of God. He sees everything, even his suffering, from this perspective. Look how he describes it here:

*For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 2 Corinthians 4:17*

On an initial read we might be forgiven for thinking that Paul didn't suffer much. It was only light suffering. Also, when he did suffer it wasn't prolonged. Just momentary. But that isn't the case. Paul suffered a lot in ministry and in life.<sup>88</sup>

Paul describes his sufferings in this way because he sees them in the light of eternal glory, the promise of an eternity with Christ.<sup>89</sup> What I want you to notice, though, is the role these sufferings play in his vision of eternity. Externally he has struggles, but this has highlighted to him the spiritual work that God is doing:

*Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 2 Corinthians 4:16*

What is seen is failing, but this has focused him on that which isn't seen:

*So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:18*

There is a connection here between the suffering he has undergone and the vision of eternity that he is working from.

I remember my grandpa's first stroke. He recovered fairly well. He could get about and after a bit there weren't any obvious physical markers. Yet, in conversation you could tell. He had difficulty remembering the words to use and getting them out. Names got muddled and sentences didn't always make sense. He was always

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<sup>88</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:8-10, 2 Corinthians 11:23-29

<sup>89</sup> Romans 8:18

able to laugh at himself so that made it easier, but things were different.

That wasn't the last stroke or major illness that he had. Over the years there were more, each taking a bit more of his strength and abilities. Then, at the end of 2001 my nan, his wife, died. He was living with my parents, now a widower.

I trained for pastoral ministry at the church where my grandpa was a member and it was my privilege to visit him in that capacity. I don't know why, but as his grandson I didn't feel able to ask deep spiritual questions, probably a reflection on my lack of spirituality, but now I was expected to.

Over these visits I got to know my grandpa in a different way. I got to see his faith, hear his prayers and we were encouraged in the Lord together. One thing I learnt was that he dearly wanted to go to be with Jesus. I remember bringing news of another member of the church who had died. He looked at me with compassion, but also with longing and said, "There's another who has gone before me."

Why did he want to go? It wasn't because he didn't love his family and didn't want to meet his great-grandchildren and watch them grow up. It wasn't that he'd given up on life. The suffering of his last years had taught him that the things of this life are temporal, they fade and disappear. The only thing that lasts is found in Christ.

Am I there yet? No. But I do sense a change. Every time I set my heart on something here as the thing that will satisfy me, and then experience the pain of its emptiness, God pulls a peg out of the tent. Every growing weakness in my body is a prompt to lessen the anchor

to this world and look to eternity. The suffering I see is a reminder of the limits of this world and an encouragement to focus on the reality of eternity.

Without the presence of suffering how many of us would want to leave? If everything were perfect here, how many of us would desire eternity? I asked that question at a Q&A session in our church. The general acceptance was: 'we wouldn't'. Through suffering God sets our eyes on eternity.





## 6

## Through the gateway

Woodwalton Fen is one of the older nature reserves in the UK. The land was purchased by Charles Rothschild in 1910 and it's still open to this day. At the center is the 'Rothschild Bungalow', his base for his field trips over the Fens, and the site is full of wildlife.

We came across Woodwalton by accident one day. We were on a day trip somewhere else and thought we'd come to the turning. We followed the narrow track past some houses, through some fields and then the way was blocked by water. There was a lane to the right where it looked like we could park, but not much else.

We decided to investigate and haven't looked back. It is now a family favourite, a peaceful haven with enough surprises to keep our nature-loving sons happy.

When you park your car, you aren't yet in the nature reserve. To get there you have to cross the river. You have to open the gate and walk across the bridge.

The Bible brings to us the promise of a glorious eternity for all who put their trust in Jesus. An eternity with God, without pain and filled with joy. But how do we get there?

For the majority of believers, the gateway to eternity is the gateway of death. There are a handful in scripture who avoided death and

then there are those who will still be alive when Jesus returns.<sup>90</sup> But for everyone else, the river is crossed through death.

What is death? Death is part of God's judgement on this world. It was not present as God pronounced the goodness of creation.<sup>91</sup> It came as a result of human sin and God's curse. We fight against death because we know it doesn't fit.

Last spring, we had a couple of sparrows nesting in our garden. We watched them going backwards and forwards bringing their building materials and then later taking it in turns to go and get food. We laughed as we watched them flying to another part of the garden, looking the other way and then suddenly darting into the bush. Secrecy was high up on their agenda.

One morning I was walking across the lawn when I looked down and saw the baby sparrows. We don't know whether they fell out of the nest or if a cat got them, but there they were, on the ground, dead. It was a sad day. Just a handful of sparrows, but they were dead. How much more should we be concerned about the death of a human being? Death should never be something we're ok with.

Death is painful. Death is hard. Death is suffering. Death turns a person into a corpse. It separates body and soul. It leaves behind it a trail of hurt, misery and broken hearts. There is nothing inherently good about death.

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<sup>90</sup> Eg. Enoch (Genesis 5:24), Elijah (1 Kings 2:11)

<sup>91</sup> Genesis 1:31

For the believer death is all that, but it is also something else. It is release; it is the end of suffering; it is the gateway into the presence of Jesus.

When Paul was in Rome, in prison and awaiting the result of his trial, he wrote to the church in Philippi. He faced the real possibility of execution and was caught between two minds about what he wanted for the future:

*I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Philippians 1:23–24*

Is it ever right to want to die? Surely, death is something we should avoid at all costs? Not for Paul. He is willing and ready to surrender to death.

It's important to note why. His reason is not death itself. He doesn't write about the thought of his bodily functions stopping or the reality of an impending execution. His reason is clear. It would mean a step into the presence of Christ.

This is what changes death for the believer. It is no longer something to be feared, but an often-painful step of a bigger journey. That's why Paul could say:

*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Philippians 1:21*

I still remember the first time I was confronted with this truth. I had been asked to visit an elderly couple in the church where I was training for pastoral ministry. They'd managed to get a double room

with a great view of the grounds. The husband was lying on the bed. He was sleeping and I noticed the rattle in his breath the moment I came in. The wife sat by his bedside watching on.

I came back many times that week. Each time he had declined. The breathing was worse. I remember sitting there with his wife waiting for the last one. Every now and then there would be a pause and we'd think that it had happened.

Eventually I got the call and rushed over. He had died, but his body still lay there. What should I do? Who should I go to? It was my first time in that situation. I went to the wife, held her hand and we cried.

Then we spoke about realities. Where was he? What did this mean? He had trusted Jesus, he was a Christian, now he was in the presence of Jesus.

Death is part of suffering. So why does God permit and will it for his people? Because through it he is bringing them over the bridge and into eternity. An eternity that is more glorious than we could ever dream. An eternity with Jesus.

## 7

## For our good

God promises to work for the good of his people. More than that, he promises to order 'all things' for the good of those who love him. So, what is good for us?

That's a really important question. Naturally we answer that our good means ease, comfort and the desires of our heart. We have a plan, one that has been worked out over many years and through many experiences. We take this dream and present it to the promise God makes.

What happens when the suffering comes? It's not part of our dream, not a step in our plan. How can God bring this in my life? This isn't good, it's not what I wanted. God you've got it wrong. You promised my good.

But God's good plan for us is not the same as ours. It is better and more lasting. He wants us to mature as followers of Jesus, knowing Jesus and delighting in him. He wants us to set our hearts on treasure that is real, not fake, and he wants to bring us into eternity with him.

How does he do this? As we've gone through these chapters, we've seen that suffering has a big part to play. It is the tool in God's hand that brings growth, focus and a deepening love for Jesus. It is not the mindless whim of an uncaring God, but each moment of suffering is placed in our path by our loving, gracious and good Father.

Martha Snell Nicholson captures the conundrum in her poem:

*I stood a mendicant [beggar] of God before His royal  
throne  
And begged him for one priceless gift, which I could call my  
own.  
I took the gift from out His hand, but as I would depart  
I cried, "But Lord this is a thorn and it has pierced my  
heart.  
This is a strange, a hurtful gift, which Thou hast given me."  
He said, "My child, I give good gifts and gave My best to  
thee."  
I took it home and though at first the cruel thorn hurt sore,  
As long years passed I learned at last to love it more and  
more.  
I learned He never gives a thorn without this added grace,  
He takes the thorn to pin aside the veil which hides His  
face.<sup>92</sup>*

Grasping these truths doesn't remove the pain of the suffering. I know that all too well. Yet, it does transform our perspective. Rather than seeing the painful situation that we are facing only as an enemy to be defeated, we can see it as a gift of grace with a lesson to learn and a blessing to receive. We can learn, with Paul and James, to rejoice when the trials come.

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<sup>92</sup> Martha Snell Nicholson, "The Thorn." I first came across this poem listening to a message given by Steve Saint at the 2005 Desiring God Conference, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*.

*He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. Revelation 21:4*





## Part 4

# The end of it all

Driving home one evening we came to a level crossing. The barriers were just closing and with a sigh we came to a stop. It was dark; we looked along the track for the lights of the train. It came slowly from the left and my heart sunk when I saw it was a goods train. Not only that, it had two engines which normally means it's going to be a long one.

One by one the wagons went by and still they kept coming. The question came into my head, 'will it ever end?' It did, eventually and we crossed the line and got home.

Suffering can often feel like that. One event after another bringing difficulty, heartache and pain. You just climb out of one valley and find another on the other side. This is true on a personal level and on a global one. Will it ever end?

The question is then magnified within us because we don't want to accept the current situation. We long for something better. Although we may not always express it this way, we long for the paradise that God first created. Will it ever end?

The Bible answers this with a yes and a no. It is important that we understand both of these. The answer is 'no', for those who reject Jesus. We cannot read the Bible honestly and escape this. For those

who continue in rebellion against God the end comes in Revelation 19 and 20.

Here God promises to remove evil from the world. In three visions we see the Lord Jesus destroying the powers of evil and Satan and bringing condemnation to those whose names aren't written in the book of life, those who haven't trusted in Jesus.

At the end of each of these visions we find the lake of fire. Those thrown into its heat do not experience an eternal paradise without suffering.

God does not promise that everything will work out ok for everyone. He promises that he is on the throne and there will be a day when his rule is clearly seen – the day when Jesus returns. For those who reject Jesus this will not be a 'good' day. God is a righteous and just judge and he will deal with sin on the last day. Every crime will be paid for, every wrongdoer brought to justice.

How many terrible acts are performed in this world and the perpetrators get away with it? How many have got away with terrible crimes because they have money, power or brains? On that day nothing will be left hidden. But it is not just these 'unpaid crimes' that God will deal with on that day. It is all of sin, any sin. No-one can hide from the Great White Throne of judgement.<sup>93</sup>

However, God does offer everyone an alternative, a different future through Jesus.

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<sup>93</sup> Revelation 20:11

That brings us to the 'yes'. To those who belong to Christ, who by grace have repented of their sin and trusted in him, to them is promised an eternity where suffering is a thing of the past – an eternity in the New Heavens and New Earth.

In this section, I want to show you some of the things that God tells us about eternity. To help us we're going to base ourselves in the vision or visions of Revelation 21-22. Knowing where we're going helps make the journey there that much easier, even with the bumps.



# 1

## Getting our bearings

A friend had recommended I download it before I went on holiday, but I was dubious. A walking map app on the phone? Why would I need that when I had the real thing, a paper map of the area?

The plan for the holiday was to climb Ben Nevis, all 1345m of it. At about 800m above sea level we entered the cloud, the drizzle began and visibility varied between 10-20m. My 14-year-old sons didn't seem to notice the incline as they bounced from step to step, but my much older limbs were feeling the strain.

I was so thankful I'd listened to my friend and downloaded the map to my phone. With the help of GPS I could see exactly where we were, which was useful when we were passing close to the cliffs. It also meant I could tick off the metres climbed and spur myself on when I was ready to turn back. I couldn't let the boys show me up, could I?

When climbing in the mountains it is always important to know where you are. You need to get your bearings and understand where you stand in your surroundings. If you don't, you can get into all sorts of problems.

Before we consider what eternity will be like, I want to stop and get our bearings. When we land at the beginning of Revelation 21 where are we? Where do we find ourselves in God's plan of salvation?

The simple answer is, 'This is heaven'. However, that is probably more confusing than it sounds. Let me explain.

Where does a Christian go when they die? Their body remains here, but they go to heaven to be with Jesus. There is plenty of biblical evidence for this. On the cross one of the criminals crucified with Jesus cried out to him in faith. Jesus' reply is dripping with grace and full of hope:

*"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." Luke 23:43*

As a believer, no matter how briefly, the criminal's death would mean access into heaven.

Paul speaks about this to the church in Corinth:

*We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 2 Corinthians 5:8*

Or to the church in Philippi:

*I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far. Philippians 1:23*

When a Christian dies their soul goes to be with Jesus. Where is that? We know that Jesus today is seated in heaven at the right hand of the Father. It makes sense to see this as the place where Christians go. They go to 'heaven'.

Ok, let's come back to Revelation 21 and 22. Is heaven the place that is described there? The answer is 'no'. This is not the 'heaven' where

Christians go when they die. This is the new heavens and the new earth where Christians will spend eternity.<sup>94</sup>

Although the Bible clearly teaches that the souls of Christians who die go to be with Jesus in heaven, it does not teach that this is their final state or resting place. One day, the Bible says, Jesus will return. He will bring with him those who have already died. They will be raised with new bodies.<sup>95</sup> Those who remain will be changed, receiving their resurrection bodies, and together they will come to the new creation.<sup>96</sup>

This is 'heaven', if what you mean by that is eternity with Christ in his glory. It isn't 'heaven', if what you mean is a place of merely spiritual existence somewhere out there beyond the sky. Eternity with Christ will be spent in the new creation. We will be physical and spiritual beings. We will have bodies, in many ways like the ones we have now, although so much better.

Eternity is very different from now, but not disconnected. The Bible begins with the creation of the heavens and the earth.<sup>97</sup> It closes with the promise of the new heavens and the new earth.<sup>98</sup> This is where God's plan is going, and where we will be if we trust in Jesus. So, what's it going to be like?

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<sup>94</sup> Revelation 21:1

<sup>95</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:15-16

<sup>96</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:51

<sup>97</sup> Genesis 1:1

<sup>98</sup> Revelation 21:1





## 2

# No more death

It was the dry season in the African Savannah. The riverbeds were empty and the grass had turned a light brown. The animals were wandering around trying to discover the last remnants of nutrition available.

Then the rains came.

The film makers showed the next days and weeks in just a few seconds. It was amazing. As the water fell, the rivers filled, new grass sprang up and life returned. A dead, barren landscape was transformed into a life-giving paradise.

That is the picture that fills my mind as we're taken inside the New Jerusalem. In Revelation 21 we find ourselves standing in the new creation, and as we do, we see:

*the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. Revelation 21:2*

The New Jerusalem is a picture of the church of Christ, the bride of Christ.<sup>99</sup>

In Revelation 22 we are taken within the walls. The first thing we see is a river flowing through the middle of the city. It is a river of life and

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<sup>99</sup> Revelation 21:9

flows directly from the throne of God and of the Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ. The picture is clear. In eternity, God's people will experience life continuously supplied directly from God himself.

In John's Gospel Jesus makes this amazing statement about himself:

*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. John 10:10*

Believers in Jesus knows something of this today. They have been forgiven their sins and saved from judgement. They now have the Holy Spirit within them and they know God. In eternity, this experience will deepen and broaden to a completely new dimension.

As we follow the river from the throne through the main street of the city we find:

*On each side of the river stood the tree of life.  
Revelation 22:2*

Is this a single tree that is so large that it spans the river or is it multiple trees that line the river? To be honest, I'm not quite sure how to picture it. What is clear is that it dominates the scene of the main street.

The tree is not only impressive in size, it is also filled with fruit:

*bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. Revelation 22:2*

The picture here is one of abundance and plenty; of a limitless supply that will never run out.

We can find this hard to understand because we live in a world where there never seems to be enough. Take a mother bringing out the cake for her daughter's birthday. She's spent ages making the layers and doing the decorations. Now it is time to cut it up and in just a few minutes there will be nothing but crumbs. She looks around. How many people are there? How small would the pieces need to be?

When you're sharing a cake, the more people there are the less each person can have. It's a limited supply. The picture of life in eternity is different. There is fruit in abundance. Plenty to go around for everyone to have all they need.

When the Israelites were in the desert, God provided them with manna to eat. Each day, except the Sabbath, the people would gather it from the ground. Everyone had enough:

*he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little. Exodus 16:18*

That's what it will be like in eternity.

In our garden we have an apple tree. The fruit ripens in October each year. It's only a small tree, but the crop is good, 40 – 50 apples at least. If we stored them correctly, we could make them last the whole year. So long as we didn't have too many at once. So long as we use them sparingly.

That's not the case here with life in eternity. The river is always flowing, the trees are always fruiting. There is never a lack, never a shortage and never a time where we will have settle for a smaller piece.

How different this is to our world. Look back over history, what do we see? The river of death flowing from the judgement seat of God. Since Adam and Eve's first sin where all of humanity fell, death has been an ever present. Its persistent presence has dogged every generation. It surrounds us each day.

Yet, in eternity death has no place in the new heavens and the new earth. It is not God's eternal plan for his children. Here, life is God's continuous and gracious gift.

# 3

## No more pain

No visit to the woods seems to be complete without at least one nettle sting. They seem to grow everywhere and you barely have to touch the stingers for the venom to do its work.

As a boy, I was taught what to do when you were you got a nettle sting. Look around and find a dock leaf plant. Tear off one of its broad leaves and rub it vigorously on the sting. The moist sap soothes the pain.

The tree of life at the centre of the New Jerusalem is not only a tree with plenty of fruit:

*the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.*  
*Revelation 22:2*

On first reading this might seem a strange thing to say. Does that mean that there will be pain in eternity? If not, why is there still a need for healing? The Bible is clear that pain will be gone (more of that below). So, why healing?

This is a picture of what God will do with our past pain and hurt. Here, we have lived lives filled with suffering and difficulty. There, God will apply full and complete healing.

The picture is the same as the one we see earlier:

*He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Revelation 21:4*

Here, tears are the result of the suffering and brokenness of this life. There, God will wipe them away and they will never return.

The new creation is a place where suffering is a thing of past. Here is God's promise:

*There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.  
Revelation 21:4*

Can you imagine that? It's built on the victories of Christ in Revelation 19-20. Evil, sin and everything wrong has been dealt with. What's left is how things were meant to be.

The town I live in is a fairly safe place. I can walk the streets at night without having to look over my shoulder. I can drive around with the doors of the car unlocked. If we do happen to forget to lock the doors of the house everything is still there when we return.

That's not the case everywhere. There are roads that if you want to drive on them you lock the doors and get to the other end as fast as legally possible. There are places where the idea of a policeman on a bicycle would be ludicrous. They require heavily armoured vehicles. There are many 'no go' areas in this world. But there will none in the new heavens and the new earth, for the old order is gone.

In the UK, every major town or city has a hospital. They are huge places full of wards and treatment rooms. Doctors surgeries are everywhere. The National Health Service is the country's biggest employer with over 1.5 million staff. None of this will be needed in the new heavens and the new earth, for the old order is gone.

No crime, no fighting, no illness, no pain. None of the things that frustrate and burden this life will be present. Imagine that! If there are TVs in heaven, what will the news reports be like?

Our existence today is shaped more than we can tell by the curse of God on the world around us. In the new heavens and the new earth this will be different:

*No longer will there be any curse. Revelation 22:3*

Isaiah gives us a picture that helps us to see just how different it will be.<sup>100</sup> In it we see a wolf living with a lamb. A leopard sleeping next to a goat. A calf and a lion together with a little child leading them. Imagine seeing that in a parade down the high street.

There is a cow next to a bear as they feed from the same trough. A young child playing around the hole of a cobra and another with his hand in a snake's nest. Just reading that fills me with dread. I've just watched a programme about the timber rattlesnakes in New England. They hibernate in nests by their hundreds. I would not want to put my hand in there.

Isaiah tells us of a world with no curse – that is why things are different. Does this mean that there will be animals on the new heavens and the new earth? Maybe, part of me hopes so, but I don't think that is the main point. The main point is that the curse will be removed.

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<sup>100</sup> Isaiah 11:6-9

There is something important to tie in here. This is only possible because of the cross of Jesus. Around the New Jerusalem there are strict notices about who may enter:

*Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.  
Revelation 21:27*

The only way this can be a place without the curse is if it is a place with sin. The curse was God's judgement on our sin. The only way it could be removed is if sin has been dealt with. That's why the new heavens and the new earth can only be a place for those who have come to Christ. As we're told:

*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." Galatians 3:13*

At the cross Jesus purchased this eternity for his people. If we receive it by faith our future is one that is so different from today.

Pain is so much a part of our existence now. Body pains, family pains, community pains, global pains. We see the reality of the curse as we remove the weeds from the lawn. We see it in our families. We see it as we walk down the street and even in the middle of nowhere. That's not how it will always be. The new creation will be a place without pain.



## 4

## No more separation

Complete darkness is very hard to find. We have a building site next to our home at the moment. The floodlights are on all night to discourage anyone from coming and helping themselves. In the middle of the night, even with the curtains shut, a few streaks of light come into our bedroom. Add to that the glow of the alarm clock and there is enough to begin to pick out the shadows of the furniture.

When someone puts their faith in Christ they come to know God. They are reconciled to him and are no longer separated from him.<sup>101</sup> But we still don't know the fullness of this. As John writes:

*Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. 1 John 3:2*

We are in the room with God, but the light is low and the best we can make out are the shadows. When we get to the new heavens and the new earth the lights are switched on, full brightness, and we see everything.

As we continue our journey through the New Jerusalem, we come across this wonderful promise:

*They will see his face. Revelation 22:4*

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<sup>101</sup> Colossians 1:21-23

One of our most memorable family holidays was a trip we made to Canada to see family in the middle of the winter. It was colder than normal, and the ground was covered in snow. One day we took the kids to see Niagara Falls. I wasn't prepared for the sight we saw. Parts of the falls seemed to be completely frozen with the ice rising from the water below. The biggest section of the river was still flowing and I remember standing there, in awe, watching the vast quantity of water pouring over the edge.

I think I could have stood there all day watching and not got bored of the sight. If that is the case with a waterfall, imagine what it will be like in eternity, looking at the infinitely deep and wonderful face of Jesus.

Yet, in what way will we see Jesus? I remember one occasion when my sister and I went on a mission. Christmas was approaching and surely our parents had got the presents by now. But where were they? We had snuck into their bedroom and were checking the normal places. Looking under the bed had brought no results, but then we found the bag in the wardrobe. We weren't meant to be there, but curiosity had got the better of us. We wanted a look.

Is that the way we will look at Jesus? Will it be the short look of curiosity, of one who is not really meant to look, or will it be the constant privilege of those welcomed with open arms? The Bible answers this loud and clear.

The city is a people who belong to Jesus,

*His name will be on their head. Revelation 22:4*

These are his people who he is pleased to call his own. He is not ashamed for them to bear his name, but he marks them as his own for all to see. They are those who belong with Jesus and will enjoy him forever.

The last description of the city speaks about its light:

*They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. Revelation 22:5*

We used to live in Swansea on the south coast of Wales. It's one of the wetter areas of the UK and winter days were often cloudy, wet and dark. It made such a difference when you woke up to the sunshine. There was warmth and light and it put a spring into your step. Light brings joy and happiness.

Here, what are we told? In the new heavens and the new earth we will enjoy the light of God himself. We will bathe in his presence day after day after day with never diminishing, but always growing wonder, awe and amazement.

At the heart of the promise of eternity is God himself. The central statement is this one:

*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." Revelation 21:3*

What are you looking forward to when you think of eternal glory? So often the thing that captivates us can be the removal of pain or the opportunity to meet up with people who we've known in this life.

Those are not small things, but they aren't the main thing. The joy of heaven is:

*The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city,  
and his servants will serve him. Revelation 22:3*

The reality of eternity for God's people is more than the absence of suffering. It is the presence of God himself and the pleasure of enjoying him forever. As David puts it:

*You have made known to me the path of life; you will  
fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures  
at your right hand. Psalm 16:11*

The Bible ends with a vision that is truly mind blowing and beyond our ability to understand. In his love and goodness, God, through Christ, has given to us an amazing future to look forward to.

## 5

### The future's ...

We were walking down the track when we came across a family. They were viewing their map, looking around them and discussing something in lightly frustrated tones. It seemed obvious, but I thought I'd better check: "Do you know where you are?"

They'd taken a wrong turning and ended up in the wrong place. Now they were trying to work out how to get back.

The Bible puts two paths before us. One is to live in unbelief, to reject Christ and the offer of forgiveness in the Bible and choose our own way. It's a path that leads to the throne of judgement, eternal punishment and hell.

The other path is one of faith, receiving Jesus as Lord and Saviour and being made right with God through the cross of Christ. It's a path that leads to the throne of God in the New Jerusalem, an eternity with God in his glory.

Both of these paths bring glory to God. In the first he is shown to be gracious in his patience with rebellious sinners as well as just and holy in dealing with sin.<sup>102</sup> In the second his justice is displayed in his

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<sup>102</sup> Revelation 19:1-3

punishment of sin at the cross and his grace and mercy in forgiving his enemies and welcoming them into his kingdom.<sup>103</sup>

For us the contrast couldn't be more different. On the one hand, eternal death; on the other hand, eternal life. Everlasting suffering, or everlasting joy. Paying the price of our sin, or enjoying the freedom that comes because Jesus has paid it for us.

For the Christian, suffering will come to an end. It is part of our reality now, but it will not always be so. If you are reading this book and you haven't trusted in Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, can I point out how important this is. Eternity is in the balance. The invitation of Jesus is without limit:

*"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened,  
and I will give you rest." Matthew 11:28*

If you have trusted in Jesus, here is something for you to rejoice in. You have an eternity to look forward to – one without difficulty, without pain and without suffering. This is a future that can sustain you through the difficult times and transform the way you perceive them.:

*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth  
comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.  
Romans 8:18*

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<sup>103</sup> Romans 3:25-26; Romans 5:10

## Putting on the right glasses

One day my son asked if he could put on my glasses. He was pretty young, but already had a pair of glasses of his own so I thought, 'Why not?' He took my glasses and perched them on his nose. They looked comical, the edges protruding way beyond the side of his head, but hey, he was smiling.

I thought I'd give his ones a try. I put them on and my vision went completely wonky. Everything changed shape and I couldn't see clearly. My glasses are a plain prescription, his are something completely different.

When it comes to suffering it is vital that we view it through the right glasses. If we don't, our struggle will be far more than it needs to be.

Our natural approach to suffering is to see it as something undeserved. It's not that we claim to be perfect, just that we are not bad enough to deserve what is happening. So often when something happens to someone we love our thoughts go to others who we think might deserve it more.

We also struggle to view suffering as anything but bad. 'How can a good God allow suffering?' That's a question that pre-supposes that suffering and good simply do not go together.

As we walk through the valley, the hardships dominate our vision and it can be so easy to become consumed by them. This is a hopeless perspective. Self-pity, bitterness and frustration can so easily become the new norm.

But what happens if we take these glasses off and put on ones prescribed by biblical truth? The frames are built out of the assurance of God's absolute sovereignty. Their lenses are shaped by the reasons the Bible gives for suffering and they are specially designed to bring eternity close into our vision.

These glasses allow us to see that good and suffering can and do go together in God's eternal plan. They allow us to see that in permitting and willing suffering in the world, God is good.

That doesn't mean that evil is good, or that suffering should be desired. But it does mean that all God's sovereign purposes, even those that determine suffering, come from his love, mercy, justice, righteousness and faithfulness: his glorious and perfect character.

These glasses allow us to look forward and see the horizon. It isn't suffering all the way. There is an end in sight – a slope at the edge of the valley where we step out of the pain of this existence into an eternity with Christ.

These glasses do not remove the pain. Suffering is hard. The Bible accepts that, and God knows it. At no point are we asked to call it anything different. They do not answer every question. The answers the Bible gives are general, not particular.

However, they do give us a different perspective, one that is clear and not twisted. One that enables us to walk the path of difficulty, experience the pain although confused as to the reason, but still trusting in the God who holds us in his hands.



When we suffer, with God's help we need to put these glasses on. We need to remind ourselves that he is sovereign, that he is good in all he does. And we need to remind ourselves of his plans for eternity. If we do, though our circumstances might not necessarily change, the way we view them will. And that will make all the difference.





Suffering is hard. In varying ways it's something we all face and have to deal with. It impacts the world in which we live, the people we love and our own personal lives.

So why is it there? How does this fit with a God who is both all powerful and all loving?

