

OpenTheo

How Can a Good and Sovereign God Permit Suffering



Making Sense Out Of Suffering - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg addresses the philosophical question of how a good and sovereign God can allow suffering in the world. While some believe that God should not permit such hardship, Gregg argues that suffering can serve as a means of growth and development for individuals. He also suggests that God does not control free will and that the bigger picture of life must be taken into account when considering the issue. Overall, Gregg offers insight into the complex relationship between God and suffering.

Transcript

Now what I'm going to do in a few minutes, we're going to start our first session. As you know, or probably know, we're going to do four sessions. The reason this is so long is because I'm reteaching here a series that was four lectures long previously.

It's not that the lecture series needs to be redone so much, though I think that the recording of the older series can be improved on. This subject, by the way, needs to be retaught from time to time anyway because we're going to be talking about Making Sense Out Of Suffering. Suffering is a universal human experience and it's a universal Christian experience, and yet many Christians, and certainly many non-Christians, don't have a clue what to do in terms of making sense out of why they're suffering, how to turn the suffering experience into a profitable experience, whether spiritually or otherwise.

And yet that's a main theme of Scripture. It's not a small theme. We find it beginning in the early chapters of Genesis, the first human suffering, and the first causes of human suffering.

We see suffering in the Scripture all the way until you get to Revelation, Chapter 21, where we finally see a new Jerusalem where there's no pride and no tears and no pain and no suffering. So, up until that almost the second to the last chapter of Revelation, you've got a book about suffering. Actually, the Bible is a book about reality, and suffering is a very important part of reality, which is why there's so much about suffering.

But it's not just that the Bible writers had to deal with suffering, and they didn't want to, but suffering is an important part of the story. Certainly the sufferings of Christ are the central event of history and central to the story of what the whole Bible's about. But in the process, before Jesus comes and after, we find a great deal of suffering on the part of certainly evil people, but also on the part of righteous people.

And it's the latter that is hard to make sense out of, usually, especially if you're the person. If you happen to be the innocent person who's suffering, it usually doesn't make sense. And so, what we're going to talk about is what the Bible teaches about why there is suffering.

We're going to talk about what benefit God intends for His people to experience from suffering. And we're going to talk about the big picture of what God's doing in history, and why suffering isn't such a major part of that. We're also going to talk about what to do about suffering, because not everybody who could benefit from their suffering, not everyone does benefit from it.

There are responses that the Bible definitely instructs. When you're suffering, do this. And if you do that, the Bible guarantees that you will gain from your adversity.

But if you don't do that, your suffering can be simply wasted, which is a terrible waste. You have to go through something intended to make you better, and in fact, find out that you didn't get any better because you didn't respond to it in a faithful, proper way. So, there's a lot there in the Bible.

We're going to talk about not everything the Bible says, but certainly all the major themes related to our processing, the existence of suffering in a world that God made, a good God, an all-powerful God, how can there be suffering if there's a good God who's all-powerful? And we're going to also focus a great deal on how to process suffering when it occurs in our lives, and to exploit that suffering as God intends us to for improvement. So that's what we're going to be doing. I'm going to pray, and then we'll get started.

Thank you, Father, for those who've come out this Saturday afternoon, and for the opportunity that you have provided for us to open your Word and focus on important issues, important to you and important to us. And Father, I thank you for the pastor of this church, Pastor Fox, who's allowed us to just invade and use the facilities. He's so generously done this.

We pray your blessing on him and on the church here. And so, guide us by your Spirit as we seek to understand what your Spirit has inspired through your Word, and which he can apply and make living truth in our lives. Open our understanding that we might understand the Scriptures, and open our eyes that we might see Jesus, we pray in his name.

Amen. So I kind of, just before praying, told you something about where we're going to go with this. Many people do believe that God shouldn't have made a world of suffering.

Some people think that it's easier to believe in a God who wouldn't do that. I remember one of my pastors years ago said that when he first took over a small church, he decided to start visiting the people on the membership list who had not been there for a while. He visited the home of a man who hadn't been to church for a few years.

And the pastor didn't know him, but when he introduced himself at the man's door and said, I'm the pastor of such and such church, the man went and got a shotgun and says, get off my porch, get off my property. I don't want to have anything, don't want to say anything to a preacher. And this man had been a member of the church.

And so the new pastor said, well, I don't quite understand what your hostility is. What is it you have against me? What is it you have against the church? He said, I will not ever believe in a God who would allow my three year old daughter to die as she died of leukemia. Now, obviously this man's daughter had suffered and he and probably his wife and others had suffered because of the loss of the daughter.

And he took that as an excuse not to believe in God. And he's certainly not alone. Of course, one might ask him, did you not know before your daughter died that children die every day all over the world? You believed in God knowing that.

How is it that only when you have suffered, suddenly belief in God becomes a challenge? Were you unaware all the years of your life that there's children dying all over the world, that people are suffering unspeakable horrors? You knew that to be true and yet you believed in God as long as he didn't touch you. Now, that's not what the pastor actually said. He was a little more pastoral, but that's what I would have said.

That's why I'm not a pastor. I'd say it sounds to me like you're just totally self-centered here. You know, people have been suffering the same way you've suffered your whole life and you've known that that's true.

And that didn't bother you. Not enough to make you question whether there's a good God, but suddenly it touches you. And now what? Now you can't believe in God, you're angry at God.

Well, that's just the way people are. People are self-centered and it's that very self-centered nature that makes it in many cases necessary for us to go through suffering because that's part, in many cases, of the cure. At least it's intended to be.

It doesn't always result that way because humans are interactive creatures. We interact with God, unlike animals. God just programs into animals' instincts and they do what he wants them to do.

People interact. People submit or rebel. And they believe or they don't believe.

And therefore, though God has intentions for suffering to help, and it often does, it may not if we respond improperly to it. So we need to understand what it is we are to do, how we are to respond, how are we to look at the thing, how are we supposed to make sense out of suffering. Now, I'm going to deal with this on two prongs.

One is the whole phenomenon of suffering in the world. Why is there suffering in the world? We're looking more at the big philosophical picture because we live in an age where atheism is becoming much more prominent than it was in our culture a generation ago. And the atheists don't have any rational arguments for atheism, but they have some emotional ones.

I know because I read all their books, I've watched their debates, I've debated a few of them myself. Atheists do not come from a rational place. They may be very rational people in other respects, but when they argue against God, they're simply being emotional.

And the main argument they have is they're angry at God because there is suffering. Maybe they've been through it themselves. Maybe they're just sympathetic toward others who've been through it.

How can there be a God who allows children in Haiti to die because they don't have clean water? How can there be a God who allows children, you know, to see their parents hacked to pieces before their eyes and maybe the children lose a few arms and legs too because of Islamic raiders who come to their village and just are hostile and just want to do damage? How can there be a God who would do that? And this is the philosophical question that really Christians wrestle with as well. It's just that Christians, when they wrestle with it, somehow find some way to not lose their faith over it. But frankly, many times Christians' faith is truly challenged by this question.

You know, when you hear of some horrendous suffering that some innocent person went through, you think, where was God? Where was God when this happened? How come God let that happen? If I was God, I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't let that happen. I'd intervene, right? And the argument against God that exists from the presence of suffering, especially the suffering of innocent people, is because of two points that Christianity affirms about God and that most people, even non-Christians, feel ought to be true about God if there is a God.

One is that he's all powerful and the other is that he's all loving. It's not hard philosophically to imagine that there could be a God who's not all powerful and is all loving. And because he's all loving, he would like to prevent all suffering, but he's not all powerful so he can't prevent all suffering.

Now, are Christians who take that approach? The Word of Faith movement takes that approach to some extent. The argument of that view is that God is a good God. God is a loving God.

He doesn't want people to suffer. He certainly doesn't want you to go through poverty and sickness and those kinds of things. What kind of father would want his children to go through that? God's a good God.

Now, of course, you guess, well, then why is there suffering? Well, the answer they give has several parts to it. One is the devil causes suffering. And, you know, God would like to alleviate the suffering, but it requires that we operate consistently in what they call the law of faith.

The Word of Faith teaching holds that the greatest principle governing the universe is called a law of faith, sort of like the natural world is governed by the law of gravity, the spiritual world is governed by the law of faith. They say even God is governed by the law of faith, that he created the world through the law of faith, which strikes me as a very strange claim, but nonetheless, that's what they claim. And they say if we learn to operate in the law of faith, that means you learn how to confess positively the things that you will create in reality by what you confess, if you believe it strongly enough, then you will find that you don't get sick and that you don't get poor and these bad things don't happen to you.

And therefore, if there is suffering in your life, really what it comes down to is that God doesn't approve of that suffering, he wants it to be gone. He's a little frustrated, perhaps, by the fact that you're not getting rid of it by having enough faith. But you certainly cannot, in their view, say that God has a purpose for your suffering, that he actually would like for you to be going through this thing at this moment because there's something good he has in mind.

This is something that they consider to be heresy. And just let me quote a few people who say something like that. Kenneth Hagin is considered to be the father of the Word of Faith movement, and he said in the book, *Healing the Father's Provision*, he said, quote, I believe that it is the plan of God our Father that no believer should ever be sick, that every believer should live his full life, time, and actually wear out if Jesus carries and fall asleep in Jesus.

It is not, I state boldly, it is not the will of God, my Father, that we should suffer with cancer and other dread diseases which bring pain and anguish. No, it is not God's will that we be, excuse me, it is God's will that we be healed. Now, this is not unusual, this is like every Word of Faith teacher says these things, but it states it quite well.

My father would not want that to happen to people. My father's a loving father. I've got a good God.

He doesn't want people to suffer. Kenneth Copeland, a disciple of Kenneth Hagin, known probably to everybody who has a television, said in his book, *The Troublemaker*, I refuse to believe that my Heavenly Father would hurt me. Well, that's a little simplistic.

My son, when he was 16, got in a skateboarding accident, and he was taken to the hospital. We sat in the emergency room for a while before they got to us, and by the time we got to the doctors, his arm had begun to heal, not straight, because it had not been set yet. It was, you know, it had been broken earlier in the day, and we actually, the friend who was with him actually pulled it out straight, which the doctor said was a good thing.

I wouldn't be able to have done that. I don't think, the broken arm is, you know, bent at a right angle where there's no joint, and his friend had the presence of mind to pull it out straight and take him to the ER and call me and say, hey, we're at the ER, so I went, and by the time that, by the time the doctor was available, the arm had already begun to heal, and the doctor said, well, you know, the problem here is I'm going to have to break the arm again. I have to break it and set it again.

Now, my son had been sitting there in excruciating pain waiting for a doctor to come, and now the doctor is going to put him in more pain. Now, my son was a minor, which meant the doctor needed my permission. Now, am I going to give the doctor permission to hurt my son? My son knows I would do anything to prevent him being hurt.

Kenneth Copeland said, I can't, I refuse to believe my heavenly father would hurt me. Well, my son probably would refuse to believe that I would hurt him too, but here I am in a position to decide, am I going to let him experience more pain now or let him grow up with a crooked arm the rest of his life? And although, you know, I was able to reason with my son. He's quite heroic, and he said, go ahead and do it, you know, but he was 16 and a half.

If he'd been three, what if he had been three years old? And I said, son, I'm going to let this man here break your arm. Well, my son would think, what? I can't believe my dad would do a thing like that. How could my father be so cruel as to allow me to have pain when he could, it's up to him, he's making the decision, he's inflicting this pain on me.

Well, he wouldn't understand, but that wouldn't mean I didn't have a very good reason for allowing it. You see, for someone to simply say, I don't believe God would let me be hurt. Well, maybe you don't know how broken you are.

Maybe you don't know how crooked you are. Maybe you don't know how loving God is and what suffering may have to do with God's love for you. It's a very shallow thing for people to say, God is a loving God, therefore he'd never want me to endure suffering of any kind.

And that is the position some take. What they're really saying is God is all loving, but he's not necessarily all powerful because he would prefer that I never suffer, but he can't stop it because I don't have enough faith or because the devil's too strong. I had a pastor write to me many years ago now.

He had read one of my comic books where in something, I don't remember what exactly, and it said something about trials and how God brings trials into our lives. And he wrote back, he sent the comic books back. He said, I thank you for the comic books, but we just don't agree with this theology.

I don't believe God brings trials into our lives. And he sent me a tape of a sermon that he had recently apparently done and it was called Don't Blame God, which is a title I knew very well that he'd swiped from Kenneth Hagin, who had a book by that time. In the taped sermon he sent me, he was talking about how God doesn't bring bad things in your life, only the devil does that.

And apparently his congregation knew, he alluded to things I didn't know about him, but apparently he and his wife had lost a baby. It seems to me like the baby had died almost immediately after birth and it had been not so long ago previous to this sermon. And so he made allusions to it.

I didn't know the backstory, but he said in his sermon, he says, you know, when we were told that the baby was dead, do you know, you know what pulled me through? He says, you know, my wife and I, how we pulled through this when we heard the baby was dead? He says, we said, God is not in this. And that's what kept our faith intact, that God was not in this. And I remember when I heard him say that, I thought, well, that's interesting because at the time, this is back in the 80s, only a couple of years earlier, I had lost a wife in an accident.

She'd been hit by a truck and killed instantly. We'd only been married six months. But, when the paramedics told me she was dead, I would say what saved my faith at that time was, I said, God is in this.

Totally opposite view. His faith was maintained by saying God's not in this. This is the devil.

My faith was more like, I was inspired by what Job said, the Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord. God is in it, he's got a purpose in it. Now, to say that God has a purpose in suffering, to some people, is to say God's a bad God.

But let me ask this, what if God didn't want that man's baby to die, but the devil wanted it to die? And there apparently was a tug of war between the will of God and the will of the devil, and the devil won. That doesn't make me feel extremely comfortable. Now, I could still believe such things, even if they're uncomfortable, but let's just face it, it's

hard to know exactly how God can make any promises of protection to us if he can't protect us.

Are not the scriptures full of promises that the angels, the Lord, encamps around about them, that fear him and delivers them? That he's given his angels charge over thee, and in their hands they'll bear you up, lest you dash your foot even against a stone. That God had put a hedge, for example, around Job and all that he had so the devil couldn't touch him. Doesn't the Bible say that God protects his people from chaos? Now, I don't mind if God makes an exception, if God says, I protect you normally, but there are times when I think you need to go through a little bit of something that I'm going to have to remove the protection somewhat, like he did with Job.

But to say God wanted to keep a shield around, he wanted to keep a hedge around, but the devil just got over the hedge anyway, and God couldn't stop him. Well, then who's running the universe here? Who's really in charge? God didn't want my wife to die, but the devil killed her anyway. Well, where was God? Was he helpless? That's what it sounded like to me.

You see, we have to allow that although God is all-loving, he's also all-powerful. And it's true that there are some things that even infinite power can't do, just like, I mean, infinite power cannot make 2 plus 2 equal 5, all right? It can't happen. Infinite power cannot make a square circle.

That's just logically ridiculous. And infinite power cannot make people freely choose certain things, because if God did make us choose it, it's not free on our part. So, I mean, logically, it's impossible that God could unilaterally make me make a free choice a certain way or another.

So, in other words, I have to make some choices on my own, and no doubt that has an impact on the outcome of some things. But God is not so weak that he wants to protect me from harm. Let's just say a virus.

Let's say I get sick. Is God incapable of destroying that virus because I don't have a positive confession? God heals. I mean, lots of people get viruses.

Non-believers get viruses, and God brings them through it, you know? I mean, God has power over viruses and those things. You know, it's interesting how many people I've known who were in fact dying of cancer, and they died all the way confessing that they were healed, because they've been told they're healed and you've got to confess it. I've known several people who died of cancer while they were practically, their last words were, I'm healed, and they've been saying it consistently all the way through their sickness, but they weren't healed.

Word of faith people say you'll get what you say. Well, that's just not true. Nobody can

claim that they've always gotten what they say.

It's a made-up doctrine. It's not in the Bible, and it's not found in reality. There was a lady named Janie I knew in Santa Cruz back in 1987 or 88, I think it was.

She was in a Baptist church, and she was a young woman with a young husband and young children and lovely family, and someone told me that she had been given up with terminal cancer, and I was running a Bible school. We needed something done after we decided to go and pray with her and visit her, and when we got there, we were amazed how radiant and pleasant and happy she was in the Lord, and she said, don't pray for me to be well. She said, the Lord has spoken to me that I'm going to die.

She said, the Lord has told me the day that I'm going to die, and she mentioned the date. I don't remember now what the date was, but she actually mentioned a calendar date and said, God, show me I'm going to die this day. The doctors are giving me no hope.

I'm ready to be with Jesus. Her family seemed to be ready, you know, to let her go be with Jesus if that's what God wanted. Wonderful family.

We did pray for her to be healed when she wasn't, when we weren't there, but she wouldn't let us pray for her healing while we were there because she didn't want to. She didn't want to be healed. She wanted to go be with Jesus, and she said, God's already told me.

Well, you know what happened? That day came, and what happened on that day was her husband took her to the hospital, and they ran tests on her. She didn't have any cancer in her body at all, not any cancer, and I saw her five years later. I moved away to Oregon, but I came back to Santa Cruz, visited her and her husband five years later.

She's still cancer-free. They'd started a ministry of outreach to Catholics at the time, and she hadn't had any recurring of the cancer. Now, are you going to get what you say? She said she was going to die that day.

She said it consistently. She believed it. That was her faith.

Kenneth Hagin says, according to your faith, be it unto you. Well, she got healed of cancer confessing that she was going to die, whereas friends of mine who were confessing they were going to get healed died of cancer. It simply is not a true statement that you will have what you say.

It is not true that God's will is always to heal, and that if you aren't healed, it's your fault for not having enough faith. That's not what the Bible teaches anyway, but God is all-powerful, and He can heal someone even when they're confessing they're going to die. There's nothing that can prevent God from healing somebody or from providing them

and getting them out of poverty or keeping them from an accident or saving them from an intended criminal attack.

You know, there are 40 men who swore that they wouldn't eat or drink before they killed Paul. Well, that was their thought. God had other ideas.

They weren't able to carry that out. Why? Because God didn't want them to. However, Paul later was beheaded by Nero.

Well, why didn't God deliver from that? Apparently, he didn't want to. Same thing with Jesus. Really, many times in Jesus' life, they took up stones to stone Him, but they couldn't because His hour had not yet come, the Bible says.

They walked through their midst, but the hour came when God delivered Jesus over them. It was His time. It was God's will for Him to suffer.

If God doesn't want you to suffer, He's got more than enough angels. He's got 12 legions of angels Jesus could have called to deliver. He can save you.

If He doesn't do it, it doesn't mean you're doing something wrong. It doesn't mean He's not a good God. It means that He's got a purpose.

What is the purpose? Now, the great challenge, of course, is believing that God is good when He seemingly allows purposeless sufferings. I mean, if I do something bad and suffer for it, I don't think God owes me any explanations, right? If I'm sitting in jail because I tried to smuggle cocaine into Turkey, you know, it's like no mystery there why I'm suffering. If I'm driving intoxicated and I go through a barrier and I'm injured and paralyzed from the neck down, well, I'm suffering, but it's not a mystery.

There's no philosophical crisis that I have to face. Where was God? Well, He was probably right there, you know, and I brought it on myself. So, when we bring it on ourselves, that's not something we have trouble making sense of.

It's when we didn't. It's when we were the good guy. It's when we did the right thing and we suffered for it, either persecution or even just some random, seeming random suffering, or we've gotten sick and we were the ones who were following Jesus, you know, and the pagans around us, they're living a pain-free life, you know, and here I've got pain wracking my whole body even though I've done nothing but serve God.

What's up with that? How do we make sense of that? Well, we can because the scripture actually gives us information about that, but you can see it's not the easiest thing in the world to immediately answer the question, why does that make sense? If God is all-powerful and all-good, all-loving, why couldn't there be suffering? And as I said, it's the chief argument, excuse me, of philosophical atheists. There can't be a God, like the Bible describes, with so much suffering in the world. The atheists are pretty shallow thinkers.

It's obvious. You only have to read their books to know that they're not very deep thinkers, but it doesn't occur to them apparently that the God of the Bible is very quick to acknowledge the presence of suffering, including unjust suffering in the world. Read the Bible.

Joseph was innocent and his brother sold him in slavery. He was innocent and his master's wife accused him of trying to molest her and he got thrown in jail. He was innocent and a helpful man.

He helped his fellow prisoners and they forgot about him and left him there to rot for another two years. He suffered. He was innocent.

The Bible is very much aware of innocent people suffering. Moses suffered too when he was being righteous. David suffered when he was righteous.

The prophets suffered when they were righteous. It's the most common thing. Job was righteous and he suffered.

More significantly, Jesus was righteous and he suffered. And so were the apostles and they suffered. I mean, all through the Bible, we've got righteous people suffering who don't deserve it.

So it's not like the God of the Bible is somehow a little embarrassed and unable to account for this fact. You know, this seems to disprove his existence. If there's a God, the righteous wouldn't suffer.

And what we're essentially saying is if I were God making the world, I would make a world where there is no suffering. Well, then whoever said that God doesn't make any mistakes hadn't thought through that very well because he made a big mistake. He didn't create you first so you could advise him on how to make the world.

He obviously, God hasn't thought this through, but you have. You've got it figured out and God hasn't figured it out. Now, obviously, I'm being sarcastic, but anyone who thinks God should have done it differently and I know better how he should have done it, I don't trust their sanity, frankly.

They're not thinking things through very clearly. Christians throughout history have suffered. The idea that God doesn't want us to suffer and that we'll never suffer if we have enough faith and those kinds of ideas, those can only flourish in modern Western civilization where we live with immunities that humanity didn't have or even dream about forever.

I mean, we live in luxuries that King Solomon didn't have, the richest man of his time. He didn't have indoor plumbing. He didn't have light switches.

He didn't have, you know, a car. I mean, he didn't have, we have such luxury. He didn't have climate control in his home.

He had servants to build fires and so forth. I mean, he couldn't run a hot bath for himself. And he's the wealthiest man in the world.

And that was true of people up until very modern times. And we live in the lap of luxury and immunity from discomfort. And in this part of the world, largely immunity from such nasty things as war or even plagues.

We've never had the bubonic plague decimate the population of America like Europe did. We live, we're pampered. We're pampered people in the first group of Christians in history to be able to have the luxury of speculating nonsense about the meaning and implications of suffering.

Christianity has been strong for 2,000 years in areas that where Christians knew suffering such as we, we'd shiver to think of it. I mean, the torture that Christians have been through, the torture that Christians are now going through in some parts of the world. It's kind of, to me, this, America has spawned that idea and also spawned the idea that God would never let Christians go through tribulation because he loves Christians.

Why would he want his children to go through tribulation? I think, by the way, have you stepped outside of the United States anytime? There are Christians in China. There's Christians in North Korea. There's Christians in many parts of the world who the Antichrist couldn't do anything worse than what's being done to them.

And that's been true throughout church history. We have the luxury of thinking that because we are relatively exempt from suffering, that somehow suffering doesn't belong in the picture. The more you are pampered and spoiled, the less capable you are of handling reality when it stops pampering and spoiling you.

And every one of us here is old enough to have had certain kind of trials that we think, why'd that happen? I myself have had two wives abandoned, leaving children behind so that I was a single dad on two occasions. One wife just kind of ran off with another man. Another wife, after 20 years, kind of appeared to lose her mind and just left the faith and left the children, left the family, and wandered around on the streets for years.

I had another wife I mentioned that died six months after we got married. That's too many marriages, by the way. I don't even believe in divorce.

I've never divorced anyone. I never would. Even my unfaithful wife, I wouldn't divorce her.

She didn't give me the choice. She left. But the point here is that I know some things.

Every time I thought, wait, I didn't do anything to cause this. I love my wife. I love my children.

I didn't ask for this. I haven't had any chronic pain or illnesses, but many of you do. And we think, why? Why do I have to have chronic pain? I want to serve God.

My pain actually kind of hinders me. Certainly God wouldn't want me to be hindered from serving him like I could if I had a good, healthy body. Of course, most of us are not taking realistic stock of how old we are.

Hey, I feel like in my head I'm 30 years old. How come I don't feel like I felt when I was 30 years old? Well, we're living too long these days, I think. But the point here is that we think it's strange when we fall into various trials.

Peter says, don't think it's strange. This is part of the picture, the whole picture of the Bible. But we need to understand, what is that picture of the Bible? What is that whole picture? Why do Christians suffer, especially in view of the fact that God could make it not happen? Well, one of the things we have to deal with is, what were you expecting anyway? When you came to believe in Christianity, when you came to believe in Christ and God and the Bible, what did you think you were getting into? Did you think you were stepping onto a playground or a battleground? There's a really goofy movie, which probably most of you saw years ago, *The Three Amigos*.

These guys are Hollywood actors who play sort of a cowboy kind of hero role in movies. They're kind of has-beens, but there's some Latin American town that's got some real banditos that are terrorizing the town. And they don't know, these people in the town don't know that the *Three Amigos* are just movie stars.

They're not really heroes. They write to them saying, would you come down and help us? We've got problems here. Well, the *Three Amigos* get together.

They think they're being invited to a movie shoot. So they go down there and they've got their effeminate and their kind of dance around as they shoot their blanks and their guns and stuff. They do goofy things.

And the criminals down there, who are these weird guys? But eventually they realize, the *Three Amigos* realize, hey, this isn't a movie set. These guys are shooting real bullets, you know. I've come into a war zone here.

I thought it was just all fun and games. And there's too many Christians who, because of the spoiled nature of Western prosperity and so forth, including Christianity, they think this is a play thing. We have all this in heaven too.

We accept Jesus so that he'll take care of the remaining problems in our lives that we had before. He'll smooth things out. He'll fix my marriage.

He'll make me well. He'll provide for me so I won't be poor. I kind of expected when I come to Jesus, he's supposed to make everything go right.

And so many Christians feel like this world is a playground and it's really a battleground. They don't realize there's real bullets flying here. There's a war.

There's two kingdoms at war and it's a shooting war. It's a hot war. When you go to war, Paul said to Timothy, endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

No one who goes to war entangles himself in the things in this life that he might please him, called him to be a soldier. Paul said it's a war. He says, I'm not shadowboxing.

I'm not just beating the air. I'm fighting real enemies here. I realized that after I preached to others, I myself might become disqualified if I don't buff up my body and fight this fight.

It's a, there's a war here. If you didn't know it was a war, then it's going to seem strange that sometimes you've got to be reduced to rations or sleep in a foxhole or get wounded. But if you know you're in a war, oh, I knew that could happen.

You know, that's how war is. And Christians don't know that we are in a spiritual war zone. Similar, I mean, it makes a whole difference what you were expecting reality to be.

If you thought it was a playground, you're going to be very disappointed. If you thought it was a war, well, you may not be disappointed. You might actually think, hey, this is not, didn't turn out quite as bad as I thought it could, you know? And it's like, I heard somebody, it might have been C.S. Lewis giving the illustration once of, you know, some people who are in a compound and half of them thought it was a prison and the other half thought it was a resort.

They were all at equally, equal circumstances, but one of them, one group had been told they're in a lockup and other were told they're at a resort. The people who thought it was a resort thought it was the worst resort they'd ever been to. But the people who thought it was a prison, this isn't really all that bad.

It's all a matter of perspective. If you think you're at a resort, then of course you're going to say, I didn't expect this bad stuff to happen to me. But if you figured, hey, this is a place that's not a place of comfort, it's a prisoner of war camp, then I think, well, you know, it could be a lot worse, come to think of it.

It's all the way you shift your perspective, but we need to see it from God's perspective because his perspective is reality. Now, the question, how can a good, all-powerful God allow suffering, presupposes a thought that I don't think is legitimate to presuppose, and that is suffering is bad. Now, I don't like suffering.

I just want to make that clear. I don't want to suffer. I'd like to avoid it as much as possible.

But to say a good God who could control things should never have allowed suffering is a way of saying, it's a given that suffering is bad. Now we need to explain how a good God could allow something bad like that. Wait, I'll put on the brakes a minute.

What makes us say suffering is a bad thing? If after all, if it's not a bad thing, if it's got redeeming qualities, if suffering might have some benefits and be a good thing, then the philosophical conundrum is resolved. How could a good God allow it? Well, if it's not a bad thing, it might be very consistent for a good God to do so. I mentioned earlier my son breaking his arm and we had to re-break it.

You see, if my son didn't know his arm was broken, I would have seemed very cruel in allowing this stranger to come up and break his arm. But if he knew his arm was crooked and he knew that breaking the arm was going to correct it, then it's an entirely different outlook on the whole situation. Is the pain he suffered in breaking his arm the second time, was that a good thing or a bad thing? In the long run, it's a very good thing.

Jesus made an interesting statement about his own suffering and the suffering that it would bring upon his disciples. In John chapter 16, in verse 21, Jesus said, A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come. But as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish for the joy that a human being has been born into the world.

Now, probably most of the women in this room have had the experience of childbearing. Can you remember it? Probably. It's a significant experience.

Now, by the way, I've known a few women who've had, they say they've had essentially no pain in childbearing. That's very unusual. Pain in childbearing is a very normal thing and Jesus assumes it to be normal.

When a woman is in labor, she has sorrow, anguish even. But after the child is born, Jesus might be using a little bit of hyperbole where he says she doesn't remember all the pain. What he means is she doesn't think about that anymore.

The pain is behind her and now she got this overwhelming joy because of what was produced through that painful experience. She's got a child. Now, Jesus is there referring to the fact that he's about ready to go to the cross, the disciples are going to go through the anguish of loss of him.

They won't understand why all this pain they're going through. But he says, when I come back from the dead, it'll be like you'll see the baby and you'll be, oh, that was, forget about all the pain we went through. We got this wonderful result.

Jesus risen from the dead, you know, glorified. And that's how suffering is, or at least it's supposed to be. Suffering is capable, like childbirth, of producing something more than worth the pain.

And if we value that result like God does, then the pain will be seen in a much different perspective. In Psalm 119, in verse 71, the psalmist said, it is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn your statutes. Now, obviously, he felt like his afflictions had somehow contributed to learning more about how to obey God.

And that's something he believed was a good thing. Now, if we said to him, is suffering good or is it bad? Well, he would have to say, it was good for me. That's what he did say.

It is good for me that I was afflicted. Now, what brought his afflictions on him? I don't know. Maybe he got sick, maybe he had an accident, or maybe some really bad person did something really bad to him.

If it was David writing that psalm, we don't know if it was, but we know that a lot of the afflictions David had, most of them came from people doing really hostile things to him, Absalom, Saul, and others who tried to kill him. That's a lot of his afflictions. And a lot of our afflictions do come from the malice and hostility, or even just the irresponsibility and carelessness of others.

A drunk driver who hits you and paralyzes you is not hostile towards you, he's just careless, but it's his fault, you know. A person who breaks into the house and stabs you and you barely recover, that person's got malice. Now, if those things happen to you, is that good or bad? Well, no one can say it's a good thing that man was driving drunk, that's a sin.

No one can say it's a good thing to break into someone's house and stab them, that's a sin. That's evil. For them, that was bad, but for you, if God works all things together for good, then it becomes something that God intends for your good.

Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. That's a bad thing to do to somebody, even if it's not your brother, more so if it is. And he suffered a great deal because of his brother's sins.

Was that good? It wasn't good for his brothers, they were doing the wrong thing, they were doing bad things. But what did Joseph say at the end? In Genesis 50, excuse me, Genesis 50, I think it's verse 20, he said to his brothers, you intended evil against me, but God meant it for good. So his sufferings, were they evil or good? Well, from the brother's point of view, it was an evil act, something they would have to answer to God for.

The fact that it turned out okay doesn't justify their sin. But it was good for Joseph, it was good for the world, it was good for Egypt, and it was good for the whole family because

they were spared a famine because Joseph was sold into slavery. They intended evil, but God meant it for good.

Was it good or bad that Pilate and Caiaphas and Judas played the roles they did in the crucifixion of Jesus? Well, they're not off the hook, they didn't have any good intentions, they were just plain sinning, that was bad. But is it good that he died? It's the best of all things, besides his resurrection. In other words, Jesus' suffering, Joseph's suffering, your suffering, sometimes is caused by bad things that people do.

Does that make it bad? Yes, it's bad for them to do that. But is it bad for you? It's not supposed to, it's supposed to turn out for your good. And I've been through some forms of suffering that are, to my mind, as excruciating as I can imagine.

I'm sure there are worse kinds that I can't imagine, but I've been in sufferings I thought, I don't know how I'll survive this emotion, especially divorces, especially wives leaving, things like that. That's tough, it doesn't get much worse than that in the absence of war or plague and famine. That's about as bad as it gets.

But, and there were times I thought, I have no idea how this can work out, how could this be the will of God, that my wife is doing something that's disobedient to God. God doesn't want this to happen. But you know, what I came to understand a long time ago actually, is that God does not put it in the minds of sinners to commit sins against other people.

God didn't put it in Judas's mind, that was, he came up with that plan on his own. God didn't put it in Joseph's brother's mind. They already had that memory, they hated it.

But what God did is decide whether or not they would succeed in carrying out their intentions. Joseph's brothers probably would like to kill him a lot more. In fact, they did plan to kill him before they sold him to slavery, but God didn't let that happen.

God could have prevented him from being sold to slavery too. God could have prevented Jesus from being taken in the garden. Jesus said to himself, he said, I could call 12 legions of angels and they'd come deliver me.

I heard good God. Jesus was not at the mercy, God was not at the mercy of these evil intentions of people. God could stop them.

How many times did they try to kill Jesus before and it wasn't his hour, so they couldn't do anything to him. In other words, God can prevent anything. He wants to.

He's God. If somebody who has got evil intentions toward you and you end up suffering for it, we can't say that God made that person do the evil thing, but we can say that God could have prevented what that person did from ever touching you. A drunk driver coming across the lane, I mean, how many times have you been in near accidents that

were so close to think, how did I miss that one? I hate to admit it, but I was pulling out of the parking lot today, trying to follow a man who's leading me here.

And I made a turn in the parking lot. And as I made the turn, I just noticed that a woman stepped right out, almost exactly in front of me. And when I saw her, I sat on the brakes and didn't hit her.

I couldn't believe it. My wife is probably listening. She's probably very upset because I've had a few other close calls recently.

I think I may have to give up driving. I'm not sure. But I'll tell you, there are things that could have happened that haven't.

And if the angel of the Lord is encamped around about those who fear him and delivers him, I sometimes think more than we have taken into account. We have avoided great disasters, which could have hurt other people or ourselves. And we didn't even know that God prevented it.

But what about the times he doesn't prevent? What about the time that we do get injured? The time we do get mugged? The time we do end up in a war zone and we're losing relatives or our friends leave us or wives or children are taken from us? What about those times? God could have stopped that, couldn't he? Of course he could. What about if I'm full of chronic pain? Could God fix that effortlessly? The power he has? I mean, he can fix anything like that. So why doesn't he? Well, the ones that are caused by people doing harmful things to us, God could even stop that from hurting us.

He may not have control over their free will, whether they choose to do it. The guys who said, we're not going to eat or drink until we kill Paul. Well, God didn't have any control over their free will.

They made that decision quite wrongly. But God did have a decision about whether they're going to succeed. The Bible talks about in one of the Psalms about evil places, they had an evil intention, but they were unable to perform it.

If somebody's wrongdoing has brought pain and suffering into your life, you can know this for sure. God was not unaware of it. And God, although he maybe wasn't controlling the choices they made, he could have prevented that from having any direct impact on you, if he wanted to.

When Job was under God's protection, no one could steal his camels, no one could steal his sheep, no one could kill his servants, no one could make him sick or his kids. And the devil complained about that. He said, you put a hedge around this guy and all that he has, I can't touch him.

You just let me get at him and you'll see. He'll curse you to your face. So God did kind of

lift the protection in measure.

He allowed Sabaeans and Chaldeans to come and kill his servants and take his camels and his sheep. And then he did allow a wind to blow the house down and seemingly kill his children. And then he allowed Job to get sick too.

And all of this was fully under God's control. And Job knew it. Now, his sufferings came from a variety of sources.

The wind that blew down the house that killed his children seemed to be a natural thing. The sickness, I don't suppose he had any idea where that came from. But what the Sabaeans and the Chaldeans did, that was just plain bad people doing bad stuff, robbing and killing, pillaging.

And yet all that, all these different causes, and what did Job say? He said, the Lord gave and the Lord took away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. He didn't say the Lord gave and the devil took away, though the devil was involved.

But the interesting thing is that when Job said it was the Lord who took it away, he was not wrong. Because the devil couldn't have done a thing unless God said, okay, you can go that far and no further. And when Job said that, we're told in all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.

He wasn't blaming God. When my wife was killed, I actually said those very words, the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. That pastor who, when his child died, he said, God's not in it.

He'd be appalled by me saying the Lord took away. Because no, it's the devil took away. You're blaming God for what the devil did.

No, I'm affirming God. I'm affirming that God is in charge of his universe and he's especially in charge of my life. There's certain promises he's made to Christians and I'm one of them.

And therefore, I know that God is capable and willing to do whatever is necessary for my good because I'm his child. And if he allowed something bad to happen, it's still because he loves me. I allowed my son to have his arm broken again so he'd be healed.

That does not mean I didn't love him. In fact, it's because I did love him. I didn't do it because I was just hungry for an act of cruelty that day.

And so I just said, well, I think I'll hurt my son. It's because I knew that that was what was going to ultimately be good for my son. It's an act of love to do something like that.

The writer of Hebrews in chapter 12 speaks about this dealing of God in our lives. In Hebrews 12, verse 3, it says, For consider him who endured such hostility from sinners

against himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin, and you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons.

He quotes from Proverbs 3 here, My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by him. For whom the Lord loves, he chastens and he scourges. The word scourge means flogs with a whip.

He scourges every son whom he receives. Not the sons he rejects, the sons he receives. That doesn't seem very loving, does it? Well, read on.

It says, If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons. For what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect.

Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they, our earthly fathers, indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but he does it for our profit, that we may be partakers of his holiness. Now, no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful. Nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Now, he says, we have learned that our earthly fathers, when they chastened us and disciplined us, had our benefit in mind, although they didn't know as much as God does about what's beneficial to us. They weren't doing it just to be cruel. They did it as seemed best to them.

But God is the Father of spirits. Our earthly fathers disciplined our outward behavior, but God is training our spirit. You see, here's the thing.

Our spirits are crooked. They've been broken and tried to heal themselves wrong. They've got to be broken again.

You see, I heard a preacher the other day saying that he had a friend who, like two guys, knocked him out, and a third guy came with a knife and opened his chest up and took his heart out. He said, the man with the knife was a surgeon. The guys who knocked him out were nurses, and the man had open-heart surgery.

Now, when you heard the story the first time, you thought, how horrendous, how could God allow such a horrible thing to happen to an innocent person? When you realize, wait, he must have had something wrong with his heart. It's the same thing, only different. If he had had to go through this without anesthesia, like people had to do through most of history, it would have felt the same as being mugged and tortured by a crook.

But the difference is, the criminal who would do such a thing is hostile and evil and

trying to hurt you. The surgeon is trying to save your life. And the perspective on the whole event would be different depending on whether you thought this person needed heart surgery or not.

I wouldn't want someone to take my heart out, even a surgeon, if my heart was not diseased. But if it is diseased, then I can see it differently. The question is, do we know how diseased we are? God is the Father of spirits, and our spirits are sick.

And suffering in this life is intended as a surgical procedure. It's a redemptive measure. And if we receive it as such, and respond to it as the Bible tells us to, we will find that our sick hearts get healed, that our spirits are straightened, our crooked spirits.

That's what's going on. It's not a bad thing to suffer. It is good for me that I've been afflicted, that I may learn your statutes, the psalmist said.

And we just read in Hebrews, God does this for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. We're not naturally holy people. We've got some issues in our heart and our spirits.

We're sick. We need therapy. We need surgery.

We need intervention. And suffering is the form that that intervention takes for the most part. We'll understand that more as we look further at what the Bible says on this.

I'm going to give you a break here for about 15 minutes. And we'll come back and we're going to talk about the big picture, which most Christians do not see. And without that big picture, life is nonsensical.

But with the picture, with that larger vision, things fall into place and look sensible. And it makes it much easier for us to make sense of our suffering. So we'll take a break right there.