

## Appendix B

### Q & A: God's Purposes in Suffering

*Who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder,*

*“Why did you make me like this,” will it?*

—Romans 9:20

Common questions arise when Christians face acute suffering in their own lives or the lives of those they love. I believe the Bible provides reliable evidence of God's sovereign purposes in suffering. Though I don't hold myself up as an expert theologian, and I certainly don't claim to have all the answers, my search for understanding has led me to a place of peace and freedom. In this section I hope to share those insights in a conversational manner, accessible to anyone regardless of prior scriptural knowledge.

#### **Q: Does a loving God foreordain tragic events?**

**A:** Let's consider a few biblical examples. Genesis 15 records a series of promises God made to Abram. The first was, “Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great” (verse 1). That's a promise anyone would be thrilled to receive. Next God declared He would give Abram an heir from his own body, and his descendants would be as numerous as the stars (verses 4–5). Also wonderful. Then God promised Abram the land that would become Israel (verse 7). This just gets better and better. But God wasn't finished. Abram fell into a deep sleep, and God came to him with another promise.

“Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom

they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions” (verses 13–14).

What? Was God saying many of Abram’s descendants would be born and die in slavery and oppression? Not exactly the kind of promise one wants to hear.

And yet, God ordained it to be so, and it was so. Four generations of God’s chosen people lived and died enslaved in Egypt. They suffered humiliation and abuse. They were beaten and deprived. Pharaoh forced them to toss their newborn sons into the Nile. God knew about it all in advance. And He didn’t prevent it.

Did God love those people? Did He take note of their pain? Were the hairs of their heads numbered? Yes. And God fulfilled His divine purposes through Abram and his descendants.

We have no record or knowledge of the way God worked in individual hearts and lives during those four hundred difficult years. But we know their suffering was a necessary part of God’s plan.

The life of Joseph illustrates this truth as well. Chapters 37 through 45 of Genesis unfold the story. Though Joseph was his father’s favorite, and God gave him dreams that seemed to promise future greatness, his life went from bad to worse. His jealous brothers plotted to murder him, then sold him to Midianite traders instead. He gained favor as a slave in Egypt, until his owner’s wife tried to seduce him and then falsely accused him of attacking her. Unjustly imprisoned, he served his fellow prisoners, but his kindness was forgotten, and he languished for years. Joseph suffered thirteen years of persecution, when his worst crimes were being a spoiled brat and bragging about his dreams.

Through it all, God humbled Joseph’s heart and strengthened his faith, preparing him to take a position of great authority. Joseph ultimately preserved millions from starvation, including his

own family. When Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, he said, “Do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life . . . Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God” (45:5, 8).

Seventeen years later, when their father died, Joseph’s brothers again feared punishment for their crimes against him, but Joseph said, “Do not be afraid, for am I in God’s place? And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Gen 50:19–20).

Joseph harbored no bitterness about a plan that led him through years of suffering. He understood God’s greater purpose.

Of course, someone might argue that Abram and Joseph dealt with the God of the Old Testament, sometimes portrayed as a wrathful God of judgment. When Jesus came, didn’t He usher in a new age of grace and favor with God? Doesn’t this mean our struggles with pain and sorrow should be over?

It would be nice to think that the “mean” God who ordained suffering in the past reinvented Himself as a kinder, gentler model after Christ’s sacrifice for sin. But we would have to throw out large portions of the New Testament to embrace that belief.

After Paul’s Damascus road encounter with Christ in Acts 9, God sent Ananias to restore Paul’s sight. God said, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake” (verses 15–16).

Imagine an altar call along those lines: “You’re invited to come and receive Christ and see how much you must suffer for His name’s sake. Please form a single line, and no shoving.” And yet, Paul had encountered Jesus, and there was no turning back. Second Corinthians 11:23-28

details a few of the hardships Paul endured for Christ. He persevered with joy, because he had learned to fix his eyes on Jesus. God called Paul to suffer, and few have made contributions to God's kingdom as significant as Paul's.

One might think, "OK, that's all fine and good. But Paul was an apostle, and I am just your average Christian, trying to live a good life and get by. I love the Lord. I read the Bible. I tithe to my church. Is it too much to expect God to bless me in return? Hasn't He promised me abundant life?"

He has indeed. But I wonder if God defines "abundant" the same way we like to. We ask God to make our circumstances pleasant, and to please do it now. God is working on hearts, and that takes time. A lifetime.

Our best example is Jesus. God foreordained Christ's suffering before the foundation of the world, because He knew Jesus would be the only perfect sacrifice for sin. According to Hebrews 5:8, Jesus suffered during His earthly life to learn obedience. After all, "no servant is greater than his master" (John 13:16 NIV). If God used suffering to train His Son, should we expect to be perfected through pampering and ease?

A big part of understanding why God ordains suffering lies in trying to see from God's perspective. What we call bad, God may know to be good. We can trust God to accomplish His eternal plans with perfect faithfulness (Isaiah 46:9-10). We find peace when we learn to trust His wisdom.

**Q: If God is all-powerful, why doesn't He just make everything perfect? Doesn't He want us to be happy?**

**A:** Some Christians claim that God does not ordain tragic events. They declare God's will is

for everyone to be happy, healthy, and prosperous. Doctrine along this line is popular because it focuses on the fulfillment of human comforts and desires.

Though this teaching sounds appealing on the surface, if carried to its logical conclusion, a frightening reality emerges: There is no power sufficient to overcome evil. If God had the power to bring “His will” (i.e., universal health and wealth) to pass, terrible things wouldn’t be happening in the world. Therefore, God must not be sovereign. He must not be enthroned in the heavens, far above all rule, authority, might and dominion, as Ephesians 1:20–21 states. He must not be doing according to His will in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, as Nebuchadnezzar recognized and proclaimed in Daniel 4:35.

If happiness is the pinnacle of existence, then one must conclude God is impotent, not omnipotent. After all, doesn’t it follow that if He were all-powerful, He would accomplish His will? And isn’t His will for me to be happy and to have what I want?

God *is* all-powerful and all-wise, and He loves us too much to give us what we think we want. God uses suffering to teach us endurance and to perfect our character. “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2–4). My idea of “perfect” and God’s idea may be two entirely different things.

God created humankind for *His* pleasure and glory. Rather than being offended by the difficulties we encounter, we should stand amazed that He fills our lives with innumerable blessings, none of which we could ever begin to merit. What a marvel! God, who is worthy of all glory and praise, chooses to lavish His goodness on me, when all I deserve is the wages of my

sin: death and separation from Him.

And yet, God created me with feelings and desires. Does God love *only* His glory? Doesn't He love me, too? The wonderful truth is He does! The cross is the measure of His love. Jesus came to redeem us from sin and self, and we are made righteous in Him, fit to enter into God's presence.

God is preparing believers to reign with Him in eternity (Revelation 3:21). The church will be Jesus' spotless bride, as awesome as an army with banners (Ephesians 5:27; Song of Solomon 6:4), and she won't become that way through self-indulgence.

We love to claim God's magnificent promises, but before we can begin to comprehend them, we must overcome an earthbound point of view. God uses suffering to purify His Son's bride. As we trust God through trials, our faith grows. Faith is more precious than gold (1 Peter 1:7), and certainly more precious than any material blessing or physical comfort I may desire.

**Q: I'm not a very strong person. Since God gives us only what we can handle, doesn't that mean He won't bring tragedy into my life?**

**A:** God's personal involvement with people is a beautiful mystery. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows our thoughts, and His thoughts toward us outnumber the sand (Psalm 139:17–18). God knows the number of hairs on each head (Luke 12:7). He takes note of every tear shed (Psalm 56:8). He prepares our path, and He goes before us to remove obstacles (Isaiah 42:16). He also goes with us as our shield, and behind us to guard us (Deuteronomy 31:8; Isaiah 52:12). He covers us with the shadow of His wings (Psalms 36:7; 57:1). He hides us in the secret place of the Most High (91:1). He guards our going out and coming in (121:8). He loves us so much that He became flesh, experienced human pain and temptation, and took our place in

death. His deep love and tender intimacy defy explanation.

And yet, in many circumstances He appears unkind. We gladly recognize the Lord's hand in blessing, but when He places us in painful or difficult circumstances, we become confused.

Though the Bible cites numerous examples of God's people enduring hardship by His design, we shrink from the possibility that our own path may lead into a dark valley.

No healthy person desires to suffer. It's not fun. We pray for provision and protection, and then we trust God to answer our prayers. I believe God is pleased when we live joyful lives, thanking Him for every great and simple pleasure. He is our loving Father, and He wants us to feel protected and safe.

But many Christians live with a false sense of security. We expect God to prevent *any* disaster from overtaking us. Even though we know tragic events occur every day, humans are by nature egocentric, operating under the naïve assumption that "God will not let it happen to me."

Before I had children, whenever I'd encounter a parent or caregiver with a disabled child, I thought, *God would never give me a child like that, because He knows I couldn't handle it.* I expected God to spare me from certain trials based on my natural weakness.

Such perspective denies the nature of grace. God gives grace when it is needed. He gives wisdom for actual difficulties we face. We can't imagine ourselves overcoming tragedy, because hypothetical grace and wisdom can't compare with the realities God imparts when real needs arise.

God's wisdom determines our path, and He doesn't consult our predispositions for suggestions. When we don't see how we'll survive, He plants our feet on a solid rock and holds us there. As we stand on that rock—Jesus Christ—unmoved by even the strongest winds and

waves, we experience a blessing beyond description. In a way that can only be revealed in the midst of suffering, we know His grace.

God *does* give us only what we can handle. But He knows we can do all things through Him (Philippians 4:13).

**Q. If God is loving and sovereign, how do you explain all the unspeakable horrors that happen in the world?**

**A.** History reveals account after account of horrific suffering: war, disease, genocide, tyranny, and terrorism. In every generation, evil has touched individuals, families, communities, and whole nations. Unbelievers scoff, “If there really is a God, where is He? How could a loving God stand by while evil prevails?”

Many conclude that, if there is a God, He is callous and indifferent to pain. As Christians we grope for answers, yearning to reconcile the suffering we see in the world—and even in our own lives—with what we believe about God.

Pain tends to make people introspective. The incessant throbbing shoves other thoughts aside. Self-pity is a cage trapping pain’s captives and keeping them from understanding God’s plans. Yet, there is always a grand design. *I* am not the center of the universe. God and His purposes are.

God acts for His name’s sake (Ezekiel 36:22–23). The ultimate motive behind all He does is His own glory. His thoughts are higher than ours; His ways are past finding out (Isaiah 55:9). He is enthroned in the heavens. We are on earth, His footstool (66:1). We were created by Him and for Him (Colossians 1:16); some of us He exalts, while others He brings low (1 Samuel 2:7).

Psalm 139:16 confirms that before my son Jacob was born, every day was ordained for him



and foreknown by God. God knew Jacob would “pass through the waters.” True, this isn’t the path I would have chosen. But who am I to question God? Can the pot say to the Potter, “Why did You make me this way?” (Romans 9:20). “Why did You mold my son for fifteen years into a beautiful vessel, then mar Your own handiwork and strike him down?”

As hard as it may have been for me to see the good or the sense in this, I could nevertheless accept that God is responsible for His own glory, and He doesn’t need or ask for my opinions on how to best accomplish it. However, He does offer me mercy and comfort in my pain. He gives me the strength to handle what His wisdom chooses for me.

Peace comes from trusting God, even when I can’t understand His ways. When I cry out to Him in my sorrow, He draws near. Faith lifts me above temporal desires and expectations, and I catch glimpses of the eternal. When I encounter suffering I didn’t think I could handle—the thing I dreaded most—it presses me into prayer, where I’m conformed to the image of Christ.

“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). *All* things. I once heard a preacher say, “All means all, and that’s all ‘all’ means.” We won’t always be able to see what God is accomplishing, but we can trust He is working for good in His people’s lives, even when it appears that evil has prevailed. Such faith is precious to God and powerful beyond our comprehension.

**Q: I would think God’s blessings would reflect His glory to the world. How does suffering bring glory to God?**

**A:** Let’s consider Job. Job was a wealthy, God-honoring man. Why would God give Satan permission to wipe him out? No flippant decision precipitated God’s allowing Satan to destroy

Job's family, possessions, and health. God exploited Satan's pride, using him as a tool for furthering God's will in Job's life and preparing Job for eternity.

Before his affliction, Job was a righteous man. But he lacked a true revelation of the holy God he served (Job 42:5). When Job's friends encouraged him to confess his sins, he maintained his innocence. Though he clung to faith, he also clung to belief in his own integrity (Job 31).

The events in Job's life were not the result of a casual wager between Satan and God. A loving Father was chastening His son (Job 38–41). Compared to other men, Job was a prime specimen of faith and goodness. But he had spiritual pride. In the intense fires of suffering, the dross rises to the surface, where God can skim it off and make us pure.

In the end, Job's life and attitude brought more glory to God than he had been able to do as a self-righteous man inundated with blessings. Job's godliness reflected holy reverence and dependence. He became a man fit to stand in God's presence (Job 42).

Here's a more contemporary example. When I was a freshman at Stephen F. Austin State University, my pastor's wife, Mrs. Dodson, introduced me to Amy Carmichael's writings. During college and as a young bride, I read as many of her books as I could get my hands on. God used her to mold my faith.

Amy was an Englishwoman who went to the mission field just before the dawn of the twentieth century. She began her ministry as a young woman, and she remained a single missionary for the rest of her life.

Though Amy first served in Japan, God moved her to India, where she discovered the underground practice of trafficking young girls into temple prostitution. Poverty-stricken parents, induced by Hindu priests to sell their young daughters into "temple service," delivered innocent

children into a system of depravity and perverse abuse. “Married to the god,” the children existed to satisfy the carnal pleasure of so-called worshippers.

Amy spent the rest of her life rescuing girls from this fate and raising them in an orphanage she founded. In her middle age, she was inspecting a building project and, in the twilight, failed to see a hole that had been dug in the wrong spot. She fell, injuring her leg. Though not severe by current medical standards, the injury was not properly treated and resulted in a life of constant pain and invalidism.

Amy wrote of this experience and her struggle to come to grips with why God had allowed it. Her final analysis was this: There are no “second causes.” God is in control, and the events that happen in our lives must therefore be His will.

Though most Christians would admire Amy’s willingness to submit to God even in extreme pain, many might wonder why God would ordain a path of suffering for her. Amy had devoted her life to God’s service. Why wouldn’t God choose to bless her with good health and long life?

During this period of suffering in Amy’s life she wrote most of her books and poetry. Her impact on Christians who have read her works cannot be overstated. Elisabeth Elliot, a respected missionary, author, and speaker, wrote Amy’s biography. In the preface of *A Chance to Die*, she explains, “Amy Carmichael became for me what some now call a role model. She was far more than that. She was my first spiritual mother. She showed me the shape of godliness.”

God removed Amy from active ministry and gave her a new calling: intercession and writing. As a result, the world is a richer place. But why did God use a painful, debilitating illness to accomplish His purpose? Why is suffering so often God’s chosen tool? Couldn’t He have heaped blessings on Amy and still called her to pray and write?

As Christians we have to trust God's wisdom in His methods. The overriding sense that all things worked together for good and for God's glory in Amy Carmichael's life, in Job's life, in Abram's, Joseph's, and Paul's lives, helps put our own situations in perspective. The truth Amy Carmichael embraced rings true. God is in control. There are no second causes. When God places us on a path of suffering, we can trust Him to bring good in our lives and glory to His name.

**Q: It seems like anger, hate, and unforgiveness are consuming me. I've asked God to take them away. Why hasn't He?**

**A:** Sometimes negative emotions and oppressive thoughts result from physical or mental maladies, which can be treated through counseling or medicine. Depression, fear, anger, and bitterness often devastate or paralyze those who are afflicted by them. During times of suffering, Christians should not be ashamed to pursue professional help.

However, there's more to life than the physical realm. Spiritual enemies seek to destroy us. As long as we remain bitter, Satan knows we will never discern God's goodness in our suffering. As the accuser of the brethren and the father of lies, Satan whispers his poison to the souls of any who will listen. But Satan and his demons have only as much access to our lives as God permits. They, too, are ultimately tools in God's hands.

God allows evil powers to attack His children, because our training as Christians includes spiritual warfare. *Destined for the Throne* (Bethany House, revised 1996), a small, insightful book by Paul E. Billheimer, addresses this topic in detail.

Since we can't *see* the spiritual realm, we are in danger of either trivializing it or becoming obsessed with it. Either way we fall into a ditch. God instructs us to take up the full spiritual

armor described in Ephesians 6, but He also reminds us to depend on His protection with the faith of a child. We are victors, because our Father is a mighty warrior. The Word of God is a sword. His written judgments are weapons against Satan. His promises are the downfall of His enemies. When oppressive thoughts overwhelm us, we can declare God's truth to malignant spiritual powers and to our own souls.

As we stand in faith on His truth, He shares His authority over the powers of darkness with us (Ephesians 1:18—2:10). Whether the battles are in our external circumstances or in our thoughts, we can overcome through Christ (2 Corinthians 10:3–5; Philippians 4:13). God wants us to live peace-filled lives, and He knows we will find true purpose as we overcome Satan and self-centeredness on the battlefield with Him. Every trial is part of our spiritual boot camp, presenting an opportunity for victory and a chance to become more like Christ.

If you've asked God to take away anger, hate, or unforgiveness, but you find yourself still struggling with them, first consider whether the causes may be physical or psychological. You may need professional assistance. However, whether the attacks are primarily physical, psychological, or spiritual, all Christians should study God's Word to learn more about spiritual warfare. It is real, and we are involved in it, whether we acknowledge the fact or not. And we all need to surround ourselves with believers who pray and intercede on our behalf. No one should try to fight the battle alone.

**Q: Does God use suffering as punishment for sin?**

**A:** Before we directly address the question, let's lay some groundwork. When we make foolish choices, we suffer consequences. The person who drives drunk and kills a small child will be punished by the law and his own conscience. The child's family will grieve, too. We live

in a fallen world, and the actions of those around us affect our lives.

But we are not at the mercy of people's random acts and decisions. God reigns even over choices. This is one of the most perplexing paradoxes in Scripture. Human beings have been given free will. But God's will remains supreme. "The mind of man plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps" (Proverbs 16:9).

Romans 9 deals with this difficult topic. In verses 15 and 16, Paul wrote, "For He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy." The chapter goes on to state that God hardened Pharaoh's heart in order to accomplish His will. Does this mean Pharaoh had no choice?

I look at it this way: Yes, people can choose. But an omniscient God knows in advance what each person will choose. If God is powerful enough to speak the universe into existence, He can order events in our lives, shaping our choices. And He has full access to our hearts. We may feel like we're in control, but God is in the driver's seat.

Now, having opened a theological can of worms, let's get back to the original question. Does God use suffering as punishment for sin?

Not all suffering results from sinful choices. Suffering in itself does not indicate God's displeasure. It is not punishment. In fact, Scripture reveals that all who follow Christ will suffer. Jesus Himself—the sinless Son of God—was perfected through suffering (Hebrews 5:8–9).

Many Christians live with a burden of false guilt, because we believe the trials and difficulties in our lives reflect God's anger and judgment. We can't manage to get it through our

heads that God deliberately puts us in difficult circumstances to help us grow. He loves us too much to leave us in the selfish shallows of life.

When we sin, the Lord convicts us, and there is forgiveness available (1 John 1:9). When tragedy strikes apart from willful sin, we can put our trust in a faithful God:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner? Therefore, those also who *suffer according to the will of God* shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right. (1 Peter 4:12–19, italics added)

God wills some suffering in our lives because He loves us. Does that mean we should live our lives in dread? Not at all. We should live in joyful gratitude for His amazing blessings, rejoicing in the knowledge that God's mercies are new every morning. We should marvel at the artistry of His creation and let its majesties fill us with awe. Every day holds promise. Every breath is grace.

It is time for judgment to begin with the household of God. We are not a pure and spotless bride yet. But we know our Judge is also our Beloved. May we learn to entrust our souls to Him, knowing He is faithful. And may we open our eyes to see the beauty He is able to create, even out of complete brokenness.



