

Pastoral Theology

Divine Sovereignty, Suffering & Gospel Hope

Compare three Scriptures

Genesis 3:16-19 || Ecclesiastes 7:13 || Romans 8:20

The Bible teaches us that God is sovereign in his reign and controls all things (Psalm 135:6; Isaiah 46:9–11; Daniel 4:35). Every atom of creation is within the spheres of God’s knowledge, power and presence. But what about the world of human relationships and the world of principalities, powers, rulers of darkness and spiritual wickedness in high places (Ephesians 6:12)? The tension between this world and God’s sovereignty is often difficult to process.

God’s sovereignty over the frustrations and difficulties that we face in this world comes up often in Scripture. We see it in the story of Job: over human depravity (Job 1:15, 17), and natural disasters (Job 1:16, 19). The Preacher in Ecclesiastes tells us what God “has made crooked” we cannot make straight (Ecclesiastes 7:13). Paul also tells us that God has subjected the world we live in to “vanity,” or “frustration” (Romans 8:20). These scriptures, and others like them, echo Genesis 3, where God outlined how suffering would manifest in humanity’s life (Genesis 3:16-19).

Think of it this way: when Adam sinned in the garden, the manner in which he fell, and the form of the misery in which he landed, was according to God’s sovereign purposes. In short, God has built pain, difficulty and frustration into the fabric of our world, and all creation and humanity groan under it (Romans 8:22–23).

Only the power of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ can bring sense to this suffering and frustration. It is the gospel that provides the perspective of wisdom and knowledge to navigate the rough terrain of a fallen world, and in a strange and often inexplicable way, provides incomprehensible peace and inexpressible joy in the midst of it all (Ecclesiastes 2:26; Philippians 4:7; 1 Peter 1:8). In his sovereignty, God redeems the calamities, frustrations and pains of the world for his own glory and for our good (Romans 8:28).

Suffering in Genesis 3

The sufferings described in Genesis 3 help us understand what the Preacher means in Ecclesiastes 7:13 and what Paul means when he says that creation was “subjected to futility.” Human sin brought God’s judgment upon the whole created order. Death was promised to Adam if he ate of the tree, but in mercy, God stayed the power of death and destruction and offered hope. Creation was subjected to futility “in hope” (Romans 8:20). God’s judgment was real, so also is hope of deliverance through Jesus.

First, suffering applies to all humanity without exception.

Suffering and sorrow in life are universal (Job 14:1: “Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble.”

Second, suffering is temporary.

The suffering mentioned in Genesis 3 is physical, not eternal. God refers to the human body of the woman and to Adam, of sweat and suffering that will culminate in dust.

Third, suffering should not automatically be attributed to Satan, a witch doctor or some particular curse.

We know that Satan is still active (1 Peter 5:8; Revelation 20:10), but God is in control. God, not Satan, has pronounced this suffering on humanity.

Fourth, suffering is not fatal nor final.

In Genesis 3, God make a difference between Satan and humanity. Satan is condemned to destruction, but the earth is cursed “for man’s sake.” In mercy, God has a plan to recover men, to save some and deliver them from the curse of death. In Christ, suffering is neither fatal nor final.

Fifth, suffering is part of the gospel purpose.

The pain and suffering of vss. 16-19 follow the gospel promise in vs 15. The sufferings of life then become tools for the work of the gospel in the individual’s life.

There is a way back to God; it is through Jesus Christ, and those who follow Jesus must follow the path he took, a path marked by pain and sorrow. The road to glory is paved with pain and suffering, just like Jesus: the cross before the crown (Luke 24). This is how God planned it, so every step would be an exercise of faith as we look in hope to the final glory.

Teaching Module

Five connected Scripture case studies for a 90-minute session

AIM: To trace how Scripture places suffering beneath God's sovereign rule and directs believers toward faith, gospel purpose and final hope.

SUGGESTED PLAN: Introduction and reading (10 minutes); five case studies (14 minutes each); conclusion and prayer (10 minutes).

1. Suffering is under God's sovereign rule

SCRIPTURE CASE STUDY: Job 1:6–22; 2:1–10

Job loses his children, possessions and health through human violence, natural disaster and Satanic attack. Yet the narrative places every event beneath God's sovereign *permission* and *restraint* (expand on both the *permission* and *restraint*).

DISCUSSION: What does Job's response teach us about acknowledging grief without denying God's sovereignty?

SUGGESTED EXERCISE: List the causes of Job's suffering in the passage. Beside each one, note what the text says about God's authority and Job's response.

2. Human evil turned toward saving good

SCRIPTURE CASE STUDY: Genesis 37; 39–50, especially Genesis 50:15–21

Joseph suffers betrayal, slavery, false accusation and imprisonment. Years later, he sees that God has worked through others' evil actions to preserve many lives.

DISCUSSION: How does Genesis 50:20 help us speak truthfully about both human responsibility and God's good purpose?

SUGGESTED EXERCISE: Write two columns: "What Joseph's brothers intended" and "What God intended." Discuss why both statements are true.

3. Refuse false explanations of suffering

SCRIPTURE CASE STUDY: John 9:1–7

The disciples assume that the man's blindness must be traced to a particular personal sin. Jesus rejects their explanation and directs attention to God's work.

DISCUSSION: Which common explanations of suffering does Jesus challenge in this case?

SUGGESTED EXERCISE: Prepare a brief, compassionate response to a suffering person who has been told that a personal curse or a specific sin must be the cause of their suffering.

4. Grace displayed through continuing weakness

SCRIPTURE CASE STUDY: 2 Corinthians 12:7–10

Paul asks repeatedly for his “thorn” to be removed. God does not remove it, but promises sufficient grace and displays Christ’s power through Paul’s weakness.

DISCUSSION: How can suffering become an exercise of faith rather than merely an obstacle to faith?

SUGGESTED EXERCISE: Identify one burden that may not be quickly removed. Write a prayer shaped by Christ’s words, “My grace is sufficient for you.”

5. The cross before the crown

SCRIPTURE CASE STUDY: Luke 24:25–27, 44–47; Hebrews 12:1–3; Romans 8:18–25

Jesus explains that the Messiah must suffer before entering glory. His death and resurrection establish the pattern and the hope for those who follow him while creation waits for final deliverance.

DISCUSSION: How do Christ’s suffering and resurrection change the way Christians understand present pain and future hope?

SUGGESTED EXERCISE: Trace the movement in these passages from suffering to glory. Conclude by naming one practical way this hope should shape Christian endurance.

Conclusion

Review the developing theme: suffering is universal in a fallen creation; its immediate causes may vary; God remains sovereign; he uses suffering within his gospel purpose; and in Christ suffering is neither fatal nor final.