

Text

Readings: Gen 1 and Rev 21

Jeremiah 25:8-14

⁸ “Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Because you (the tribe of Judah) have not obeyed my words, ⁹ behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the Lord, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations. I will devote them to destruction, and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation. ¹⁰ Moreover, I will banish from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones and the light of the lamp. ¹¹ This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

¹² Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste. ¹³ I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations. ¹⁴ For many nations and great kings shall make slaves even of them, and I will recompense them according to their deeds and the work of their hands.”

Main Point

Who is God in suffering

Introduction (300)

Hook - You suffering

Are you facing significant suffering in your life right now?

- Maybe you have lost a sibling or a child?
- Maybe you have lost a parent or spouse?
- Maybe one of your parents has abandoned you?
- Maybe you have a serious disease or chronic pain?
- Maybe you are profoundly lonely?
- Maybe you feel constantly afraid and anxious?
- Maybe you fear how you will make ends meet?

Friends, Suffering is real and painful and suffering brings questions to our minds.

We must face those questions, not bury them.

What questions come to your mind when you face suffering?

Key question for today

The question I want to tackle today is:

Who is God in suffering?

We pause our study in the book of Hebrews to consider this question:

Who is God in suffering?

- Is he present?
- Is he absent?
- Is He Good?

- Is He evil?
- Is he overpowered by the powers of Satan?
- Is he in control?
- Is he willing to help, but unable?

Who is God in suffering?

Now I want us to think about this because all other questions about suffering flow from the answer to this question.

Answer this question right, and you have an anchor point to rely on.

Answer this question right, and you have the foundation ready to go through any suffering.

Outline

To think about this question, I have broken up our time into three parts.

1. God is God and we are not
2. God is Righteous and we are not
3. God is Sovereign and we are not

Part 1 – God is God and we are not

Daniel suffering

Now one person we can imagine asking “who is God in suffering” is Daniel. Who is God in the midst of the destruction of Jerusalem?

Think about it:

- An evil nation invades your country and destroys your city.
- Your nation is destroyed and put into exile.
- Many of your friends die a brutal death.

- You are separated from your family members. Some killed. Some in different prisoner groups.
- You have no hope to see your mother or father or sister or brothers again.
- You have no hope of being free again.

What questions would you be asking yourself?

I am sure there are many.

Many raw, honest, heartfelt questions that only suffering brings out.

But the one which would bubble to the top could easily be “Who is God in suffering?”

God in Charge of the destruction of Jerusalem

The stunning thing is we have the answer to that question for that specific event.

And it may not be what you expect.

Turn back a chapter to Jeremiah 24. Remember Jeremiah was a prophet in the time leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem.

Jer 24:8-10

*⁸ “But thus says the Lord: Like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, **so will I** treat Zedekiah the king of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt.*

*⁹ **I will** make them a horror^[a] to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a reproach, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them.*

***¹⁰ And I will** send sword, famine, and pestilence upon them, until they shall be utterly destroyed from the land that I gave to them and their fathers.”*

So who is God in the destruction of Jerusalem?

God is in control and He is involved.

This may make some of us uncomfortable, but God is not ashamed of his involvement in this suffering.

God does not pretend he was not involved. He does not keep it on the down low, or want to brush it under the carpet.

He is the one who sent the sword, famine and the pestilence.

God will judge Babylon

But then notice in chapter 25. In verses 8-11 God reiterates his involvement in sending King Nebuchadnezzar. He even calls him his servant in verse 9.

But then notice verse 12.

God holds the Babylonians responsible for their evil and God will punish them.

***¹² Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish** the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste.*

The Babylonians are held responsible for their evil actions against Israel and other nations. God will punish them. The Babylonians were the evil ones who caused all the death and destruction, and they will pay.

Are you starting to feel the tension?

As we come to this question, “Who is God in suffering?” we must appreciate that there is mystery in the answer.

The humility of studying God

You see, as soon as we begin to ask questions about who God is, we need to recognise our limitations.

If you wish to understand how the human body works, or the ocean, or a volcano, you can do that right?

You study it, you put it under the microscope, you apply good scientific method to it and you get some good answers.

But with God it is different.

You see God is the creator and we are the creature. He is not in the realm of created things to be studied. He is the creator of the universe to be worshipped. He is the infinite God that our finite brains cannot get around.

Trying to understand God is like an ant trying to understand a human. Or trying to explain colours to a blind person. There are some things words cannot communicate, and we must know our place.

Some true things about God

Now we can know true things about God.

The Bible is sufficient to tell us how to serve and worship God, but we must not make the mistake that the Bible contains **everything** there is to know about God.

So as we ask this questions: Who is God in suffering? We do so in humility and a desire to let God speak in his word. We wrestle with the biblical texts knowing our limitations. He is God and we are not.

Not Emotions ruled

A part of knowing our place is not to let our emotions take over. It is easy to dismiss a truth simply because we don't **like it**, or we don't **feel** it is right.

This is not how we want to approach this question. We must be thinkers, not just feelers. We must let the Bible inform us, not let our emotions sway us.

Mystery in the right place

Yes, there is mystery. But there is also certainty because we have His Word. Our certainty must be in the right place, based on the right things. And then the mystery will also be in the right place.

The Bible does shed some clear light on key things that we can know to be true.

These are pillars of truth we know are strong. Pillars we can rely on in the storms of life.

Now, one such pillar we need to establish in the midst of suffering is that God is good and all-powerful.

Let us think a bit about that.

Creation displays his goodness and power

When God created the heavens and the earth, he disploed of his power, his might, his wisdom and his goodness.

You judge the quality of the builder by the building he makes. Or the baker by the quality of his bread.

So to we get a glimpse of who God is when we see his creation.

- The amazing placement of earth in the solar systems,
- The intricate detail of a passionfruit flower,
- the miracle of life every time a baby is formed and born,
- and the list could go on.

We live in an amazing world! There is so much to be amazed and wonder at. All of these things point to an amazing and awe-inspiring creator. An awesome, powerful, wise and good God.

And the Bible reaffirms this. What was the assessment every time God created?

In Genesis 1 and 2 we read the account

- And it was good!
- And it was good!
- And it was good!
- Everything God made was good!

And then after creating man and woman, he assessed his finished work and He saw that it was “Very Good”

Power in all things

And his power did not stop at making this world. He continues to fulfil his will in power and strength throughout history.

In Ps 135:6 we read that there is nowhere His Will is not followed:

*Whatever the Lord pleases, he does,
in heaven and on earth,
in the seas and all deeps.*

And in Prov 21:1 we read how in the sphere of politics God is in control

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord;

he turns it wherever he will.

And in Daniel also recognises this absolute control of God

Dan 2:21

He changes times and seasons;

he removes kings and sets up kings;

he gives wisdom to the wise

and knowledge to those who have understanding;

Even in the seemingly mundane things like growing the grass, God is in Control. (Matt 6:30)

³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

The solar system and the weather are in his control
Matt 5:45

⁴⁵ For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

All things are in his control

Eph 1:11b. who works all things according to the counsel of his will

Again and again in the Bible we see the power of God assumed, affirmed, and acclaimed. God is all powerful and absolutely sovereign.

Good part of his character

And his creation was good, because He is good. He does good things because he is good.

In Deut 34:2 we read

*“The Rock, his work is perfect,
for all his ways are justice.
A God of faithfulness and without iniquity,
just and upright is he.*

And also in Psalm 145 we read:

*⁸ The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

*⁹ The Lord is good to all,
and his mercy is over all that he has made.*

*¹⁰ All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord,
and all your saints shall bless you!*

*¹¹ They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom
and tell of your power,*

God is perfect, just, gracious, merciful, slow to anger, powerful, wise, abounding in love, good to all.

We know these to be true of God.

We don't hold them to be true because **we** like these attributes, or because **we** think it makes for a good deity.

We hold them to be true because **He** has revealed these things about Himself to us.

That is the first pillar of truth we need to have firm in our thinking. God is Good and powerful and directs all things according to his purposes.

Part 2 – God is Righteous and we are not

Suffering and sin are linked

For the second pillar of truth, we must turn to what the bible says about ourselves, about humans.

Which brings us to our second part: God is righteous and we are not.

And as we do that it is helpful for us to take a step back and look at the big picture of the Bible story line.

First as we mentioned, God created the world and man.

But then what happened? We read about that in Genesis 3

- Man rebelled against God.
- Man sinned.
- Man wanted to be like God.
- Man wanted **to be** God.

And from that point on, death, suffering and pain became a reality.

We see that in the curse that God places on man, woman and the earth.

And this point is driven home in Genesis 5 as the plight of each person is recorded:

- And he died,
- and he died,
- and he died...

and so it continues to our day. Every person who is born dies.

Suffering, death and pain are a reality because of sin. Suffering is a reality because of rebellion against God.

Future no sin and no suffering

Suffering exists because Sin exists. Now I am going to unpack this more, but we see this link all the more clearly when we think of God's plan for the future. Please turn to Revelation 21 with me.

In this passage we read of the new heavens and the new earth. And notice how it is characterised.

- There is no rebellion.
- God is with man and they are his people,

and as a direct consequence:

- there is no more mourning,
- no more crying,
- no more suffering.

Revelation 21:1-4

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.....³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place^[a] of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people,^[b] and God himself will be with them as their God.^[c]

And then in verse 4 we see the result of no more rebellion against God.

⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

We look forward to a day with no more tears, no more pain, no more death and no more suffering.

Big picture summarised

Remembering the big picture of the bible story line is crucial as we think about God and suffering.

God created us and we sinned. We rebelled against God. We wanted to be God.

This brought suffering and death. Physical death on earth and ongoing torment in Hell.

But Jesus Christ came to rescue us from the penalty and price of sin.

And he promises, that one day he will remove us from the presence of sin.

Remembering where we are in this storyline is so vital because it reminds us that while there is sin there will be suffering.

While we are on earth, we will experience suffering because we are sinners in a fallen world.

All people are sinners

And this is really the crux of the second pillar of truth: All people are sinners.

This too can be uncomfortable for some.

To be called a sinner offends our pride. But that is exactly how the bible describes all humans.

Rom 3 is a good summary of this

¹⁰ *as it is written:*

“None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹ *no one understands;*

*no one seeks for God.
12 All have turned aside; together they have become
worthless;
no one does good,
not even one."*

....
18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

And Rom 1:18 tells us of God's response to sinful people

*18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven
against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men,
God is rightly angry against sin and rebellion against
Himself. We have earned due condemnation.*

The sinner deserves punishment because sin is rebellion against God.

Make it personal

Now this is what the scripture tells us. We are all sinners deserving punishment. But what about you? Do you think this is true of you? Let me ask you a couple of questions just to make this personal.

Have you ever told a lie? God calls those people liars.

Have you ever taken something that does not belong to you? God calls those people thieves.

Have you ever had lustful thoughts? God says those people deserve the same punishment as adulterers.

Have you ever been angry at your sibling? Ever called them names and told them to get lost? God says those people deserve the same punishment as murderers.

We deserve his wrath

Any one of those sins makes you a rebel against God, and deserving of His wrath and His judgment. And there are many other sins we commit against God.

I say this to highlight that we do not **deserve** anything good. We deserve punishment.

You know the saying “Why do bad things happen to good people?” The hard reality is that there is no such thing as “good people”.

Based on what we do know to be true about God and true about humans we should be asking “Why do good things happen to bad people”.

There are still many unanswered questions, but with these two pillars of truth we should not be surprised at suffering.

When we look at the reality as scripture gives it to us, we should in fact expect more suffering. If we are to be surprised, we should be surprised at God’s patience and grace.

That he has not given due justice against those who rebel and spit in his face every single day.

But he does not. He is patient. He is gracious.

Repent and cling to Christ

In fact suffering can be seen as a megaphone calling people to repent. To repent before it is too late.

Suffering here on earth is great, but it is nothing compared to the eternal torments of hell.

So even as you think about your sinful state. The fact that you are a rebel against God by nature, as scripture tells us.

A rebel who lies, steals and commits murder and adultery in your heart, consider Jesus's call to repentance. Turn away from your sin and turn to him.

Because of your sin, you owed a debt to God. Your sin had earned you the death penalty. The wages of sin is death, God tells us.

But Jesus died on the cross in your place. He died on the cross to pay the debt you owe to God. If you believe that he has died for your sins and believe that he rose again, God promises to clear your debt and welcome you into his family.

Will you repent? Will you believe that Jesus died for your sins? Will you let the sufferings of this world remind you of a greater suffering that is looming?

Repentance becomes our only hope to escape eternal suffering.

Link

So there we have our second pillar of truth. The second big truth we can be **sure of**. All people are sinners. And suffering comes from sin.

Now with these two pillars in our minds:

1. God's goodness, his power and his sovereignty and
2. the fact that all people are sinful,

we are ready to look a bit more closely at the interaction of these two truths. How does scripture display the interactions of these truths?

In summary, even in the context of suffering we find that God's will always come to pass and we also find that humans are always held responsible for their evil actions.

We see this in many passages, and brings us to our third and final section:

Part 3 – God is Sovereign and we are not

Destruction of Babylon

We have already seen in the case of Daniel and the destruction of Jerusalem that God affirms his role in the sending of the Babylonians. They are his servant doing his will. But the passage also tells us that He holds them accountable for their evil deeds. The sovereignty of God in the destruction of Jerusalem is proclaimed in the same breath as the fact that the Babylonians faced due punishment for their sins.

Joseph and brothers

Joseph and his brothers are another example.

Remember how his jealous brothers sold him into slavery, where he faced suffering upon suffering. Do you remember Joseph's assessment of his suffering-filled life?

In Gen 50:19-20 we read of the account when his brothers come to him in fear of what he may do to them. He now has the power of life and death over them.

And what does Joseph tell them?

¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people^[b] should be kept alive, as they are today.

His conclusion is stunning. He does not say that what the brothers meant for evil God somehow used it for good.

No, he says that God meant it for good. This was part of God’s plan. God intended this to happen. It was according to his will. While the brothers were evil in their actions (there is never doubt in that), God meant it for good.

Summarize compatibility

There are but two accounts. There are many more where God’s purposes are never undermined and evil people are always held accountable.

God is sovereign with his dealings with the world. His Will will be done. At the same time humans are held responsible for their actions. The wicked will pay for their actions.

Again and again, the Bible affirms this.

The Cross

The place where this mystery is most clearly displayed is at the Cross.

- At the Cross we see the goodness of God as he fulfils His plan to reconcile sinners to himself.
- At the Cross we see the love of God as He chooses to suffer and die on our behalf.

- At the Cross we see the wisdom of God as he makes a way for sinners to live without undermining his justice.
- At the Cross we see the power of God as the power of sin and death are defeated.

But we see others things at the cross too right.

- At the cross we see the result of jealousy of the religious leaders of the day.
- At the cross we see the horror of what man can do to his fellow human.
- At the cross we see the injustice of an innocent man being murdered.
- At the cross we see evil people putting their plans into action.

The cross also tells us something about the seriousness of sin.

- At the Cross we see what sin deserved: Death
- At the Cross we see what a just and holy and good God thinks of sin: He is rightly angry.
- At the Cross we see the only way to escape sin: If that sin is paid for.
- At the Cross we see there is no other way to deal with sin than through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. If there was another way, why would God send his Son to die and suffer for no reason?

The cross proclaims the sovereignty of God and the sinfulness of man.

Men responsible.

Let me put it this way.

Who's plan was it to crucify Jesus?

Our Bibles clearly tell us that the religious leaders conspired to kill him. They were the ones who rallied the crowds to cry out “Crucify him, Crucify him!” which manipulated the fearful Pilate to have Jesus crucified.

Judas betrayed him, the religious leaders accused him, Pilate condemned him, the soldiers drove the nails into his hands and executed him.

There is plenty of guilt and blame to go around. These people are held accountable for their actions.

God responsible?

But our Bibles also tell us that the crucifixion of the Son of God was God’s plan to redeem his people. This was his plan to save sinners.

From the very beginning in Genesis 3:15 He tells us that he has a plan. That he would send someone to “crush the head of the serpent” (sin) but the serpent would bruise his heel (the crucifixion)

From that point God alludes to a plan to send a saviour to free people from sin. Sin is serious and needs to be dealt with.

All throughout the bible we see him referring to this plan to redeem his people by a sacrifice for sin.

Prophecies like Psalm 22 which basically describe the crucifixion and Isaiah 53 which talks of this servant suffering for our sins make it clear that God had a plan.

And even when Jesus was on earth he was well aware of his mission. His rescue mission that would lead him to his death.

John 10:17-18

¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."

Summarize

The Cross was God's plan from the beginning of time. And no one, and nothing was going to hinder his plan.

And we also know that humans were evil in putting Jesus to death.

The Cross was His plan to save sinners who are responsible for their sins.

Acts 4:27-28 makes this explicit for us

*²⁷ for truly in this city (Jerusalem) there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, [plenty of guilt to go around] ²⁸ to do whatever **your** hand and **your** plan had predestined to take place.*

Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles (Romans) and the people of Israel are held accountable for their sinful deeds, and it was God's hand who put in place His plan he had chosen to take place long ago.

Conclusion

Friends as you wrestle with this mystery of who is God in suffering (and we must wrestle with it) think of the cross.

The cross represents one of the most evil acts in history and at the same time represents God's goodness, love and sovereignty.

When you face suffering, you will have to answer the question: Who is God in suffering?

Will you let your emotions answer? Will you let, rational scientific method answer?

Or will you let God answer as he reveals himself in His word?

Yes, there is mystery in who God is in suffering.

But the mystery is not in the goodness, or the power, or the Sovereignty of God. God clearly has spoken about these things.

And the mystery is not in the nature of man, and in what we deserve. The scripture also is clear on that. We are sinners deserving eternity in hell.

The mystery lies in our inability to fully understand God.

The mystery lies in a God who is outside of time and space, communicating with creatures within time and space. We are limited in comprehending Him. That is where the mystery lies. He is the potter and we are the clay. He is God and we are not.

But we know enough about Him, to love obey and trust Him.

He is a good God worthy of our trust, worthy of our love, worthy of our worship.

Let us pray.