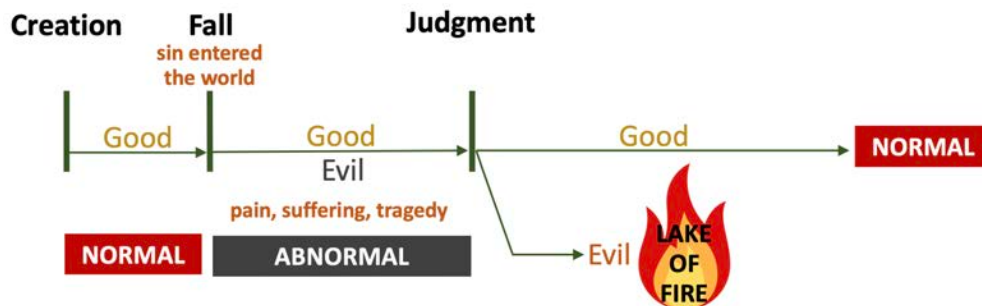


Lesson 19: Understanding Suffering

Previously...

We learnt how God created the world perfect. That was His idea of “normal”.

But the Fall destroyed it all. Sin, suffering, pain and death came into the world. The “normal” world that God created became abnormal. This is the world that we now live in.



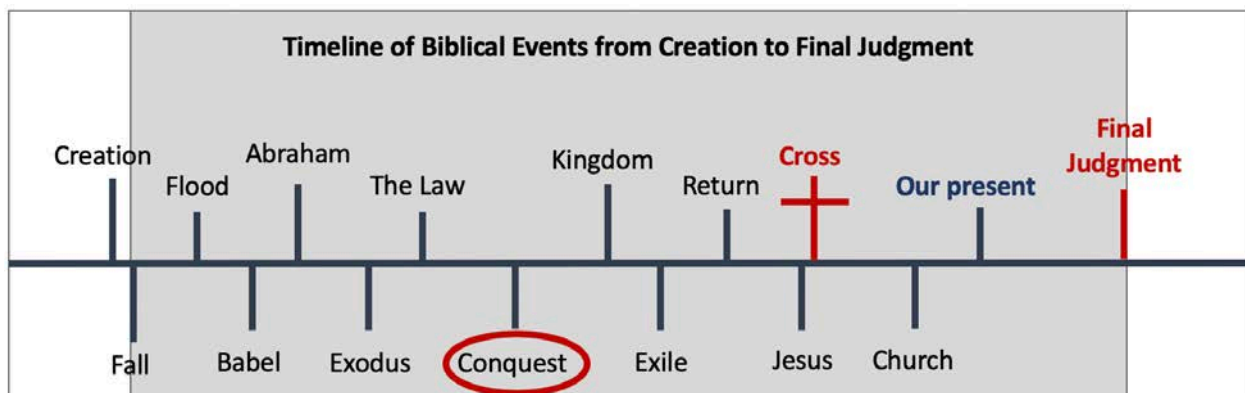
Immediately after the Fall, Yahweh put in place a rescue plan for man. In His love, He did not want man to live with evil forever.

He used the picture of the Conquest to show man what final judgment would look like and how He would separate good from evil forever.

God also used the Conquest to show how He wants believers to get rid of their own sin and to grow in trust and obedience to Him. God intends for all believers to grow spiritually and become more sanctified.







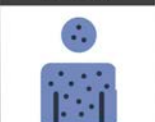

However, at our present time, before God gets rid of all evil in the world and in believers, He knows that even those who love Him would have to live with tragedy, pain and sorrow. But because He loves us and cares for every detail of our lives, God taught us how we are supposed to cope with suffering today.



Biblical Advice on How to Cope with Suffering

How does Yahweh deal with someone who is in pain and suffering?

Job experienced tremendous tragedy. He was a very successful, wealthy and godly man who lost everything all at once: all 10 of his children died; all his wealth and assets were stolen; his servants were killed; he lost his health and had painful sores all over his body; and he lost his friends. Job had no idea why all this was happening to him. He pleaded with God to tell him what wrong he had done to deserve all this tragedy.

 Job	children	servants	animals	body	friends
					
	died	killed	stolen	sores	lost

Yahweh's response to Job in Job 38–42 is extremely startling! Many of us might think that because Yahweh is a loving and caring God, He would pat Job on the head, comfort him, baby him, tell him everything would be all right and maybe even immediately return to him everything had he lost so Job would stop crying. But this was not what God did.

In fact, Yahweh scolded Job! See how He responded to Job's questions.

Job 38:1–7

- 1 Then the LORD answered Job from the whirlwind:
- 2 "Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words?
- 3 Brace yourself like a man,
because I have some questions for you, and you must answer them.
- 4 "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?
Tell me, if you know so much.
- 5 Who determined its dimensions
and stretched out the surveying line?
- 6 What supports its foundations,
and who laid its cornerstone
- 7 as the morning stars sang together
and all the angels shouted for joy?

But that was not all.

Over four chapters, God asked Job question after question:



Then at one point, God said this:

Job 40:2

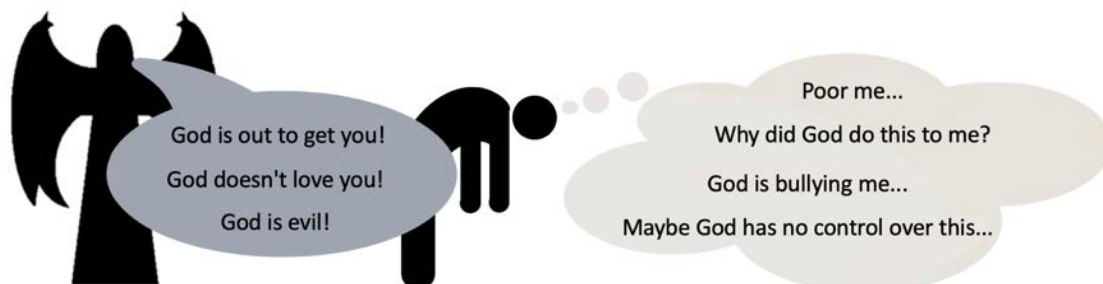
“Do you still want to argue with the Almighty?
 You are God’s critic, but do you have the answers?”

What was God doing? Why was He so harsh? Why wasn’t He more gentle with poor Job?

The way God dealt with Job and the way God talked about suffering in the Bible, teaches us a lot about how He wants us to cope with sin, evil, pain, suffering, tragedy and death in our own lives.

1. When we suffer, God wants us to remember that He is sovereign and in control of everything.

Evil is abnormal. We were never created for this abnormal world. When we suffer, our emotions are highly strung. And in our pain, our minds are vulnerable to the devil’s anti-God suggestions and we are more likely to listen to our own sinful heart.



When God challenged Job and asked him question after question, it was to help Job see once again that Yahweh has authority and power over the whole universe.



In Job's shocked state, God knew that He needed to quickly jerk him away from self-pity and the victim attitude. He needed to shake and scold Job so that Job would not start having wrong thoughts and question God's character.

God often uses questions in conversation to get people to stop and think about their actual situation and condition. For example, when Adam and Eve rebelled, they suddenly experienced new, strange sensations of fear and guilt toward God. How did God engage them? He began the conversation with a question: "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9)

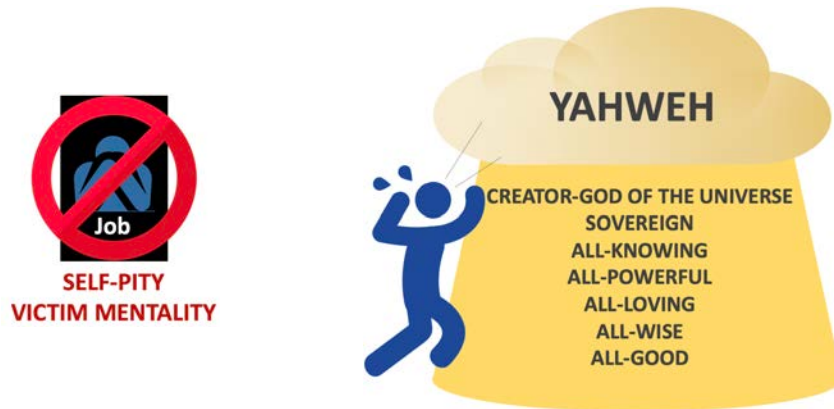


He wasn't just asking for their location, He knew where they were hiding! Rather, He was asking them to think about their new situation and condition where they now feared His presence. Their fear revealed their guilt and pointed to the root cause of their problem—their disobedience. After Adam replied, God asked more questions:

- "Who told you that you were naked?"
- "Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat?" (Genesis 3:11)

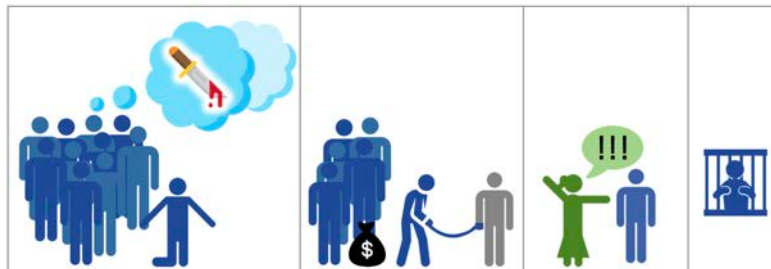
A question forces a person to stop, think and then respond. It stops them from focusing mainly on their feelings and emotions. Rather, it turns them towards thinking about the real problem they are facing.

In asking so many questions, God was reminding Job who He is. He is the God Yahweh. He is in full control of everything. God wanted to focus Job's mind on His character: He is all-good, all-wise, all-loving, all-knowing, all-everything-good.



God wanted Job to know that he did not and could not know everything that God sees and does. God had plans for Job that Job knew nothing about. All things have a purpose because God is sovereign. Even our tragedies.

Joseph is another person who went through great suffering in his life. His brothers sold him off to traders, he was falsely accused and then thrown into jail.



But here is what Joseph said many years later to his brothers. He acknowledged God's sovereignty and control even in his evil situation.

Genesis 50:20

You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people.

Just like Job and Joseph, the first thing to learn is that in our suffering, we need to remember that we are the created being. God, as the Creator of the universe, is not like us. He is sovereign and has everything under control even when we don't, and even if we don't know the reasons for our suffering. In scolding Job, God was inviting Job to trust Him as the Creator-God.

2. When we suffer, God wants us to be patient and understand that He is giving time for more to be saved.

We know that God will get rid of evil permanently. However, while we are still living with evil and suffering, He wants us to be patient. Why?

We need to understand the consequences if God suddenly ended evil, pain and suffering at this point in history. If we ask God to end evil now, we are actually asking Him to enact final judgment immediately.

But that would also mean that final judgment arrives for many of our loved ones, friends and family. We would be asking for the end of their grace period.

Before final judgment comes, people are still in the grace period where they can change their minds, stop their rebellion and put their faith in Jesus for salvation.

God says that He is patient and not bringing the end now so that more people can be saved.

2 Peter 3:9

The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.

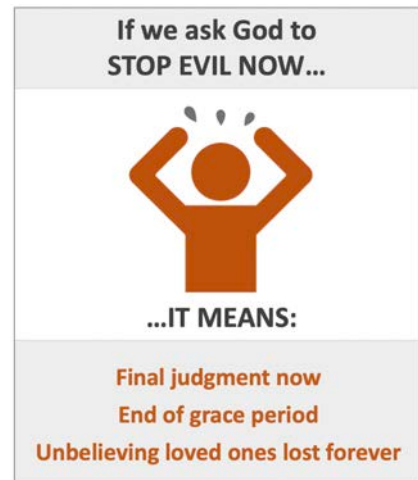
When we suffer, we should remember that our suffering means we are still living in the grace period. There still remains time for:

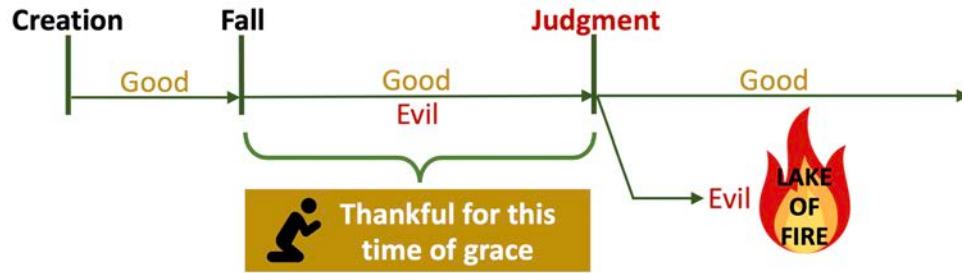
- rebellious sinners to turn to God
- people to turn from worshipping idols to worshipping the true God
- prodigals to return to Him
- believers to grow spiritually and become more like Jesus.

This grace period that we live in is one reason why we can be thankful to God in all circumstances of life.

1 Thessalonians 5:18

Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.





Following God’s Word, we should also be asking God for His mercy and patience to allow more to be saved during this time of grace.

3. When we suffer, God wants us to know that our suffering is never random or without purpose. There is always a reason for it.

God is sovereign and knows everything. Nothing that happens in the world comes as a surprise to Him. The Bible tells us that there are reasons for suffering. While we may not know the exact reason for our own situation, when we understand that God is in control and has an ultimate plan, it should help us trust God even in our pain.

What are possible reasons for suffering? The Bible has two categories:

I. Direct: Suffering due to sin (Direct consequences of man’s sin)	II. Indirect: Suffering not due to sin (Caused by God’s intervention)
1. Sickness and death due to the Fall	7. Wake-up call for salvation
2. Self-induced misery	8. Push our spiritual growth
3. Suffering within families and nations	9. Help unbelievers believe
4. Discipline of the Father	10. Encourage spiritual growth in other believers
5. Denial of rewards	11. Because of what happens in the spiritual realm
6. Eternal suffering in the lake of fire	

We will look at each of them in turn.

I. Suffering Because of the Direct Consequences of Man’s Sin

This type of suffering is related to the choices people make. It’s a direct “cause-and-effect” consequence of thoughts, words and actions. There are generally six different kinds.

SUFFERING CAUSED BY SIN					
BELIEVERS					
① 	② 	③ 	④  Discipline of the Father	⑤  Denial of rewards	
Sickness and death	Self-induced misery	Suffering within families and nations			
			UNBELIEVERS		
				⑥  Eternal death in the lake of fire	

Type of Suffering: 1. Sickness and death due to the Fall.	Affects: All people
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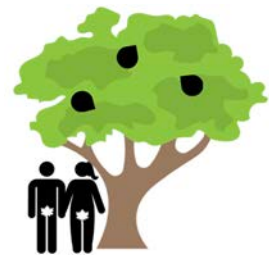
Sickness and death came into the world because of the Fall.

God warned Adam and Eve that this would happen if they ate the fruit which He told them not to eat.

But they disregarded God’s warning. The consequences of their rebellion spread throughout the world, so every person today is affected by sickness and death.

Romans 5:12

When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam’s sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned.



Type of Suffering: 2. Self-induced misery.	Affects: All people
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People’s rebellious lives lead to their own suffering.

Galatians 6:7–8

⁷ Don’t be misled—you cannot mock the justice of God. You will always harvest what you plant. ⁸ Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature.

When people continue to ignore God and live without His wisdom, they will experience greater misery, suffering and pain of all kinds: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.

People’s rebellion always has far-reaching consequences.

- When we abuse our bodies in ways that God never intended, we experience sicknesses and diseases. Our families suffer the financial, emotional and psychological burden of caring for us.
- When we indulge in bitterness and hatred, we get angry and resentful. We abuse the people around us and they do likewise. We live in peace with nobody and are always looking over our shoulders, suspicious of everyone. We suffer all kinds of stress because of our own rebellion.

Type of Suffering: 3. Suffering within families and nations.	Affects: All people
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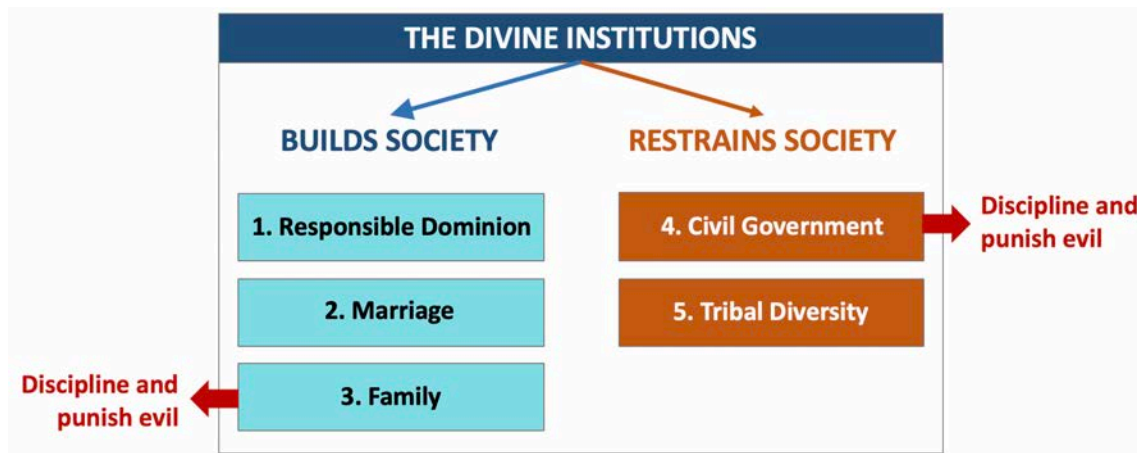
God also uses families and governments to discipline and deal with rebellion.

One of the purposes of the third divine institution (family) and fourth divine institution (government) is to discipline their members by punishing evil.

- In a family, they might be chided, punished through penalties, have privileges withheld, or be ostracised.
- Within the context of the nation, they might be convicted in a court of law and end up with fines or get thrown into jail.



This kind of suffering is due to a person’s own defiance. The family and nation enforce discipline. The purpose of the discipline is to encourage repentance.



However, suffering may also come about because families are affected by sin.

Numbers 14:18

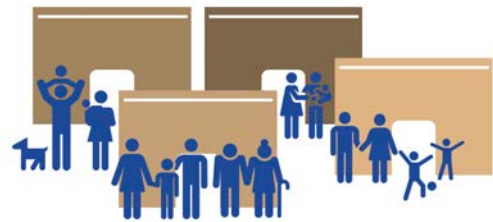
‘The LORD is slow to anger and filled with unfailing love, forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion. But he does not excuse the guilty. He lays the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations.’

What is “lays the sins of the parents upon their children”? God does not punish children for their parents’ sins because He said every person is accountable for their own sins.

Deuteronomy 24:16

Parents must not be put to death for the sins of their children, nor children for the sins of their parents. Those deserving to die must be put to death for their own crimes.

One clue to understanding what God means is the phrase: “third and fourth generations”. Oftentimes, among the Israelites in the Old Testament, three or four generations lived together or have influence over each other. The effects and consequences of the elders’ sins might “spill over” and affect the next several generations of the family.



For example, this happened at Kadesh-Barnea and later during the period of the exile. The parents sinned but the consequences had huge impact on the children and the children’s children.

Lamentations 5:7

Our ancestors sinned, but they have died—
and we are suffering the punishment they deserved!

More significantly, if the patriarch of the family is a wicked person, the three or four generations after will observe and learn to model these same traits.

Children who grow up watching the rebellious behaviour of older family members will often repeat their bad choices. But all who choose to live wickedly will suffer consequences of their personal choices.



Type of Suffering: 4. Discipline of the Father.	Affects: Believers
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God treats each believer as His own child and will lovingly discipline us, including causing us to suffer when we are rebellious.

All this discipline is to train us to be righteous.

The discipline serves as a warning and encouragement to repent. The passages below are written to believers. It is about how the church had ignored Jesus. The Lord is inviting and encouraging believers to repent and restore their fellowship with Him.

Revelation 3:19–20

¹⁹ I correct and discipline everyone I love. So be diligent and turn from your indifference.

²⁰ “Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends.”

Hebrews 12:5–11

⁵ And have you forgotten the encouraging words God spoke to you as his children? He said,

“My child, don’t make light of the Lord’s discipline,
and don’t give up when he corrects you.

⁶ For the Lord disciplines those he loves,
and he punishes each one he accepts as his child.”

⁷ As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children.

Who ever heard of a child who is never disciplined by its father? ⁸ If God doesn’t discipline you as he does all of his children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children at all. ⁹ Since we respected our earthly fathers who disciplined us, shouldn’t we submit even more to the discipline of the Father of our spirits, and live forever?

¹⁰ For our earthly fathers disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew how. But God’s discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in his holiness. ¹¹ No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it’s painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way.

The Bible tells us that sometimes, the discipline that God uses on believers is sickness and even death. For example, the apostle Paul instructed believers on the right way they should be commemorating Jesus’ death with the Lord’s Supper or communion. But some believers disobeyed, so God disciplined them by making some sick and killing some of them.

1 Corinthians 11:29–31

²⁹ For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God’s judgment upon yourself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and sick and some have even died. ³¹ But if we would examine ourselves, we would not be judged by God in this way.



God’s purpose in discipline is to encourage self-examination and change. As believers, if we refuse to change our ways and learn from God’s private discipline, He will also use church discipline to correct us.



The purpose of the correction is reconciliation, that we might have good fellowship with other believers. However, if we refuse to cooperate and change even after church discipline, God says we are to be treated like an unbeliever. This is discipline by disassociation.

Matthew 18:17

If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. Then if he or she won’t accept the church’s decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector.



God doesn’t want the church to be polluted with sin. He also wants the unrepentant believer to suffer the consequences of rebellion: separation from the people in church. Again, this is all to encourage repentance and a change of heart.

Type of Suffering: 5. Denial of rewards.	Affects: Believers
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Believers will suffer loss when it is time for Jesus to hand out rewards if they have not lived in obedience to Him.

All believers must lead a life that produces much fruit. God will evaluate this fruit at the judgment seat of Christ and will reward those with much fruit.

Those with no fruit will lose out on getting rewards. (Note: This is about believers so their justification is not being judged. It can't be since justification is a work of God, not man. Rather the work that a believer does after justification is what is being evaluated.)

2 Corinthians 5:10 (NIV)

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

Those who do not produce fruit in obedience to God will suffer loss when judged by Jesus.

1 Corinthians 3:11–15

¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one we already have—Jesus Christ.

¹² Anyone who builds on that foundation may use a variety of materials—gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay, or straw. ¹³ But on the judgment day, fire will reveal what kind of work each builder has done.

The fire will show if a person's work has any value. ¹⁴ If the work survives, that builder will receive a reward.

¹⁵ But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss. The builder will be saved, but like someone barely escaping through a wall of flames.



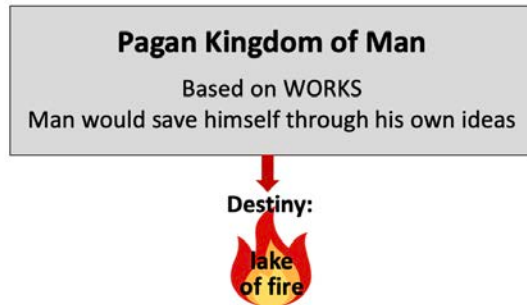
Type of Suffering: 6. Eternal suffering in the lake of fire.	Affects: Unbelievers
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Unbelievers who do not respond to God’s call to be reconciled with Him will suffer for eternity in the lake of fire, together with fallen angels and Satan.

Matthew 25:41

“Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, ‘Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons.’



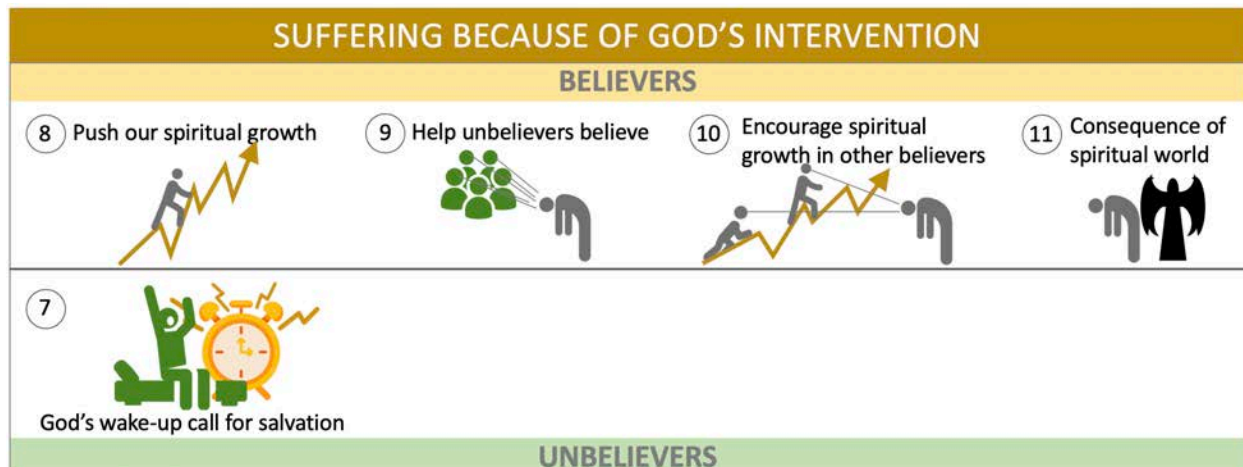
II. Suffering Because of God’s Intervention

The second category of suffering is not directly related to the choices we make. This suffering has to do with God interrupting our lives to fulfil a certain purpose He has. This is what Jesus said.

John 9:1–3

¹ As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. ² “Rabbi,” his disciples asked him, “why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his parents’ sins?” ³ “It was not because of his sins or his parents’ sins,” Jesus answered. “This happened so the power of God could be seen in him.”

In general, there are five of these types of suffering.



Type of Suffering: 7. Suffering as God's wake-up call for salvation.	Affects: Unbelievers
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God uses this specially-designed suffering to shock or shake unbelievers to pay attention to His message.

He wants people to know His history and truth. For example, God caused the Jesus-hating Saul to become blind so he would listen to God's message.

Acts 9:1a, 3–9

¹ Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers.

³ As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" ⁵ "Who are you, lord?" Saul asked. And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting!" ⁶ Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." ⁷ The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone's voice but saw no one!

⁸ Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he was blind. So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus. ⁹ He remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink.



God does the same today. Sometimes, we hear of people who have been very hard-hearted towards God all their lives. However, when faced with a tragedy, in their desperation and need of hope, they turn to the message of God.

This is God's loving and gracious "wake-up call" for their salvation. Their suffering in this life is meant for their good for eternity.

Type of Suffering: 8. Suffering to push our spiritual growth.	Affects: Believers
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This type of suffering is designed by God to push believers to grow spiritually.

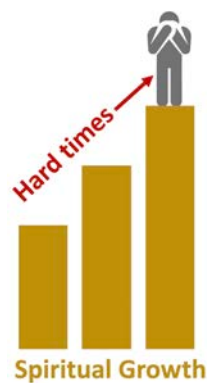
God wants us to learn that He is our Father and ultimate authority. In the following passage, God purposely let His people suffer hunger because He wanted to teach them that the Word of God is even more important than food.

Deuteronomy 8:2–3

² Remember how the LORD your God led you through the wilderness for these forty years, humbling you and testing you to prove your character, and to find out whether or not you would obey his commands. ³ Yes, he humbled you by letting you go hungry and then feeding you with manna, a food previously unknown to you and your ancestors. He did it to teach you that people do not live by bread alone; rather, we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.



When believers are asked when they grew the most in their spiritual lives, many would say that it was when they experienced really hard times. Somehow, we are keener to rely on God, pray and spend time with His Word when we are in trouble.



In fact, when things are going well, believers tend to ignore God and merrily go about their own lives. God knows this and He often uses tough seasons in our life to bring us into greater spiritual maturity. Believers recognise this as well. Hear what the psalmist says:

Psalm 119:67, 71, 75

⁶⁷ I used to wander off until you disciplined me;
but now I closely follow your word.

⁷¹ My suffering was good for me,
for it taught me to pay attention to your decrees.

⁷⁵ I know, O LORD, that your regulations are fair;
you disciplined me because I needed it.

But God does not single us out for this type of suffering. This is something every believer in the world goes through.

1 Peter 5:6–9

⁶ So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honor. ⁷ Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you. ⁸ Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Stand firm against him, and be strong in your faith. Remember that your family of believers all over the world is going through the same kind of suffering you are.

To deal with our suffering, God wants us to come to Him and submit ourselves to Him because He cares for us.

And He also wants us to know that this difficulty will not go on forever. He will lift us up at the right time. And in the end, we will be stronger and more mature. We would not have lived wasted lives, but lives that are meaningful and purposeful.

Type of Suffering: 9. Suffering so unbelievers will believe in God.	Affects: Believers
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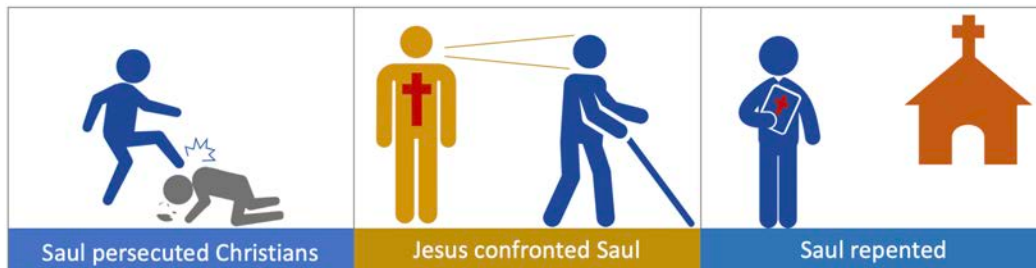


God makes believers go through suffering so that unbelievers can be convinced of the power of God and His Word.

In the following passage, the apostle Paul explains that God intentionally used him as an example so that when unbelievers observed how patient God had been to Paul, they would be encouraged to put their own trust in God.

1 Timothy 1:15–16

¹⁵ This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”—and I am the worst of them all. ¹⁶ But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life.

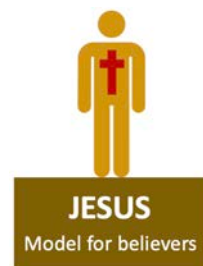


God encourages believers to patiently endure suffering while doing good. Then unbelievers can see what a righteous life they lead because of Jesus and be drawn to believe in Him.

1 Peter 2:21, 3:13–15

²¹ For God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps.

¹³ Now, who will want to harm you if you are eager to do good? ¹⁴ But even if you suffer for doing what is right, God will reward you for it. So don't worry or be afraid of their threats. ¹⁵ Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it.





Ultimately, God uses His children to attract unbelievers to His message of hope and life. If we want to be used by God to reach the world, we need to know it will sometimes involve our own suffering. Jesus Himself led by example. He suffered and bore the wrath of God on the cross so that we can be reconciled to God for eternity.

As God's children, He will use us to be an eternal blessing to others too. May we be bold to pray that He will use any means He sees fit, so that our friends and family can be saved—even if it means it is through our suffering.

Type of Suffering: 10. Suffering to encourage spiritual growth in other believers.	Affects: Believers
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God sometimes uses our suffering to help others grow spiritually.

2 Corinthians 1:4–6

⁴ He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. ⁵ For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ. ⁶ Even when we are weighed down with troubles, it is for your comfort and salvation! For when we ourselves are comforted, we will certainly comfort you. Then you can patiently endure the same things we suffer.

It is only when we suffer and then experience the comfort of God that we are better able to speak compassionately into another person's problem. For example, a believer may suffer the loss of a young child and God walks her through the pain. Later on, she meets another believer who also has suffered the loss of a child. Now, she can use her own experience with God to comfort and counsel this other believer. In other words, our suffering is training so that we can help others who will go through the same difficulty.



This type of hardship is designed by God so that one believer can help another grow spiritually. For example, God planned for Paul and his travel companions to suffer so that when others watched Paul and saw how God came to his rescue, it encouraged and strengthened them in their faith in God. This is what Paul wrote to these other believers.

2 Corinthians 1:8–11

⁸ We think you ought to know, dear brothers and sisters, about the trouble we went through in the province of Asia. We were crushed and overwhelmed beyond our ability to

endure, and we thought we would never live through it. ⁹ In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead. ¹⁰ And he did rescue us from mortal danger, and he will rescue us again. We have placed our confidence in him, and he will continue to rescue us. ¹¹ And you are helping us by praying for us. Then many people will give thanks because God has graciously answered so many prayers for our safety.

As other believers watched God help Paul persevere, there was no doubt that their increased understanding of God would grow their own faith. They could see that:

- real power was from God and not Paul and his friends.
- though Paul and his friends were under a lot of pressure, they never lost hope, faith and trust in God.



This encouraged the faith of the other believers. They reaped the benefits of the lessons that God was teaching Paul. Knowing also that our challenging journey helps other believers in their spiritual growth should also inspire and motivate us to endure.

Type of Suffering: 11. Suffering because of what happens in the spiritual realm.	Affects: Believers
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Events in the spiritual realm can cause suffering in the lives of believers.

Job 1–2 tells us how Job’s suffering came about. Satan challenged Yahweh by saying that the only reason Job was faithful to God was because He showered him with blessings.

Satan attempted to provoke God by saying that Job’s faith was not real—if God were to take away the blessings, Job would curse Him. Yahweh knew Job’s heart and He knew this was not true. So God allowed Satan to put Job through a lot of trouble to test his accusation.

Job’s story is an example of how there are things that happen in the spiritual world between God, the angels, Satan and his demons that we know nothing about. We don’t know the reasons nor the implications. However, God wants us to know that they are real. They exist.

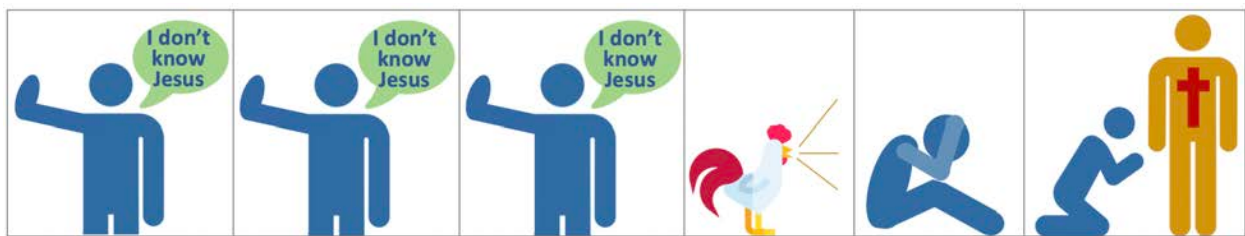


Sometimes what happens to us is a result of these interactions or battles in the spiritual realm. Jesus gave another example of this before Peter denied Him three times. Jesus told Peter that Satan had asked to test the disciples and God allowed it.

Luke 22:31–32

³¹ “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift each of you like wheat. ³² But I have pleaded in prayer for you, Simon, that your faith should not fail. So when you have repented and turned to me again, strengthen your brothers.”

Jesus knew what would happen. Simon Peter would fail the test, then repent. Jesus knew Simon Peter would learn from this experience and so He gave him the job of strengthening the other disciples after that.



While we don't know all the reasons and when this type of suffering happens to us, we can still trust in our all-good, all-loving, all-sovereign Father who is in control of the whole universe. And we can bring our worries and fears to Him. He will give us what we need to endure the trial.

When we are suffering, how do we know which type we are going through? Does God want us to make a guess? No. But He does give us some guidelines on what we should do.

4. When we suffer, we should first examine ourselves and prayerfully ask God to reveal if we are causing our own suffering through our pride or rebellion.



Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal if we are causing our own pain and if so, ask Him to identify areas where we need to repent or seek forgiveness, either from God, others or both.

We need to be humble enough to come to God and willing enough to listen to what He has to say. We also need to have teachable spirits. Coming to God with a self-righteous, defensive, victim attitude will not help us live through our troubled times well.

But if we humbly seek God even if our own rebellion caused the misery, He will help us navigate through the bad times and learn good lessons for the future.

5. When we suffer, we should pray for God to remove our suffering. But we should also pray for God to help us bear and accept our suffering.

God allowed the apostle Paul to experience visions and revelations that no one else on earth had. But to keep Paul from becoming proud, God gave him a “thorn in the flesh”. We don’t know exactly what this was, but it was a condition that caused Paul pain. Paul prayed for God to remove it, but he also prayed for God to help him bear it.



2 Corinthians 12:6–10

⁶ If I wanted to boast, I would be no fool in doing so, because I would be telling the truth. But I won’t do it, because I don’t want anyone to give me credit beyond what they can see in my life or hear in my message, ⁷ even though I have received such wonderful revelations from God. So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud.

⁸ Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. ⁹ Each time he said, “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. ¹⁰ That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul prayed three times for this suffering to be removed. Praying three times indicates that he was very serious and earnest about it. However, it showed something else too. When he stopped praying, it was because he accepted God’s answer of “no”.

So, while it is right for us to pray for God to take away our pain, we should also realise that He may be using the suffering for His good purposes. It may be God’s will for the pain to continue until all of the good that God has planned is brought to pass.

In the end we must trust God to know and do what is best for us. Praying for suffering to be removed has to be combined with praying for God’s help to accept our suffering. Knowing in the depths of our hearts that God is completely good, perfectly wise, and that His plans are best for us makes all the difference.



6. When we suffer, we should still faithfully worship God and obey Him.



Yahweh is the only One who has the solution to our pain. In our suffering, we need to go to Him and not try to solve problems independently with our human mindset. God will give us an inner peace that comes from our trusting and relying on Him in the midst of our pain.



In Job's case, after God shook him up and made him look at Him during his suffering, Job repented. He realised that he was a created being and God is the amazing Creator who can do anything.

Yahweh did not owe anybody any explanations. Whatever information God shares with man is because of His grace. Job gained a peace and assurance that stemmed from his confidence in this sovereign God.

Job never found out the reason for his suffering, but to him, it did not matter anymore. He willingly submitted himself to God. He placed his utmost trust in Him.

Job 42:1–6

- 1 Then Job replied to the LORD:
- 2 "I know that you can do anything,
and no one can stop you.
- 3 You asked, 'Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorance?'
It is I—and I was talking about things I knew nothing about,
things far too wonderful for me.
- 4 You said, 'Listen and I will speak!
I have some questions for you,
and you must answer them.'
- 5 I had only heard about you before,
but now I have seen you with my own eyes.
- 6 I take back everything I said,
and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance."

In our pain and suffering, let us run to our Creator and Saviour and honour His character by trusting in His love and power over all evil and over our situation.

Let us take comfort in the fact that:

- This evil is temporary. It will end soon.
- God is in charge and we trust Him to help us through this painful time.
- There is a purpose to this even if we don't know it or can't understand it; but we can trust our Father who has full control over it.

Job's story ended with God giving Job back twice as much as he had before: sheep, camels, oxen and donkeys. All his brothers, sisters and friends also came back to him bringing gifts of money and gold. And God gave him 10 more children to replace the ones he had lost. In Job's case, we could say he had a "happy ending". Being believers in our faithful, loving God, we can all say with confidence, that we too, will have an eternal happy ending. Our lives might look different from person to person while on earth, but God's purposes for us will not fail.

Since evil isn't anyone's fault, aren't people just victims of evil? Isn't the best we can do is learn how to survive and move on?

Unbelievers deal with pain and suffering in a very different way from believers. This is because of their underlying beliefs. Many believe that:

- evil is unlimited, eternal and normal.
- people are not responsible for evil. People are just victims.



This leads them to try and cope with evil in several different ways:

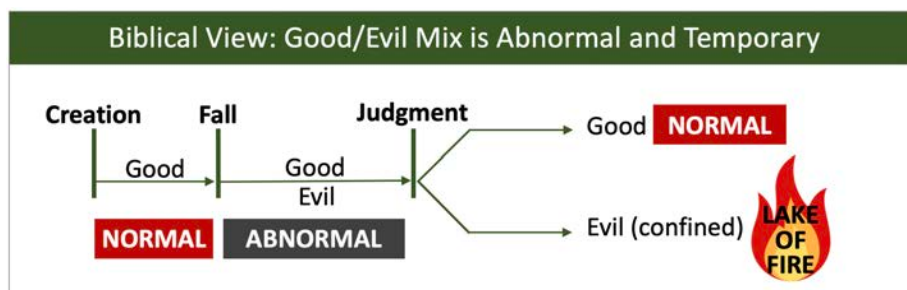
1. **Deny evil really exists.** Some people try and cope with evil by pretending it doesn't really exist. Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of the cult of Christian Science, wrote that "Sickness, sin and death are... illusion; the mirage of error". She basically meant that evil is not real. It is just in our own heads. However, she herself confirmed that pain was real when towards the end of her life, she had to have injections of morphine to deal with the real pain she was experiencing.
2. **Just accept that evil is normal.** There are those who believe that the problem with evil lies in the fact that most people cannot accept it. They argue that if people don't think of evil as abnormal, then they can easily accept it as a normal part of life. In this case, they will tell themselves not to be upset by tragedies and pain and to move on.
3. **Pretend there is meaning to the tragedy.** People can generally survive suffering better if they believe there is purpose and meaning behind it. However, because

unbelievers do not believe in a sovereign God, they have to make up possible reasons for it so that they can freely give their own lives meaning.

4. **Get rid of the pain through anaesthesia.** Most unbelievers choose this coping strategy. They want to deaden the pain they are experiencing. They may do this by immersing themselves in leisure and entertainment, alcohol, drugs or anything that would distract them from their suffering. They “eat, drink and be merry”.

None of these above ways address the underlying problem nor recognise the truth that:

- Evil is not normal.
- Mankind is responsible for evil.



In contrast, the biblical coping strategies teach us that:

- God is sovereign and will get rid of evil forever. But for now, He will help us navigate the pain and suffering of each day if we look to Him in trust.
- God will use our pain to sanctify us or others. There truly is meaning and purpose in our pain which is not something that we need to make up for ourselves. We need to trust Him to help us through them.

Discussion Questions

Discuss the following questions as a group or use them for personal reflection.

1. [Personal Reflection] Thinking about your own life and the trials or suffering you are facing, do you think any of them could be the result of personal sin?
2. When you recognise that a trial or suffering you are going through is not because of personal sin, how can you best learn or “make the most” of the suffering?
3. If you were put in a position where you could counsel someone who was suffering, how would you use what you’ve learnt in this lesson? How would your counsel change if the person is a believer or unbeliever?



Pre-reading for Faith in Action II: Review lessons 9 to 19.