

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>Special Messages</b>	Pastor/Teacher
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## Human Suffering and the Mysterious Providence of God

Things are not always as they appear. Our limited perspective as finite human beings is nowhere more obvious than when it comes to the issue of human suffering and what philosophers commonly refer to as *The Logical Problem of Evil* (LPE). There are two kinds of evil: (1) Natural evil. This refers to evil that is seen in the condition of creation (e.g., natural disasters like hurricanes, tornadoes and the CoronaVirus) and (2) Moral evil. The actuality of evil in the natural spheres that is the result of the fallenness of humanity (e.g., the act of terror on 9/11). Note that in Job's case, he experienced both (Job 1:13-19). The LPE is considered *the* major obstacle to belief in a God who is an all-powerful and good being. R. Albert Mohler, in his insightful weekly commentary, made the following analysis of the book of Job and put into focus this issue. In Job 37, Elihu, one of Job's friends, speaks to him: "Out of the south comes the storm, and out of the north the cold. From the breath of God ice is made, and the expanse of the waters is frozen. Also with moisture He loads the thick cloud; He disperses the cloud of His lightning. It changes direction, turning around by His guidance that it may do whatever He commands it on the face of the inhabited earth, whether for correction, or for his world, or for lovingkindness, He causes it to happen" (Job 37:9-13). At the end of the book of Job, God rebukes three of Job's friends for making inaccurate statements both about Job's suffering and about God. Elihu, however, is not rebuked. Elihu spoke truthfully, saying to Job, in effect, "Look, you cannot take God out of this equation. You cannot say God is not in the storm. He is." Throughout the Bible, but particularly in the book of Job, we are reminded that we simply do not have the option of saying that God is somehow not involved. If we say we believe in the sovereignty of God, we must believe that God is always and everywhere sovereign - even over the storm. The playwright Archibald MacLeish wrote a work entitled, *J.B.*, which was a modern rendering of the book of Job. In that play is the famous line, "If God is good, He is not God. If God is God, He is not good." This is the equation many people are wrestling with today: If God is sovereign, and if He controls every atom and molecule of the universe, then how in the face of so many evils can modern human beings affirm that He is good? On the other hand, if we believe that God is good, then He must not be in control. He must not be able to keep these things from happening, and therefore, He is not the all-powerful God of the Bible. In the end, it is asserted, if God is God, then He is not good; but if God is good, then He is not God.<sup>1</sup> The horrific TV images of the devastation left in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina brought the LPE to the forefront. David Murdock, who writes for the Scripps-Howard News Service, decided to give a theological analysis of the human suffering, declaring, "God, in my opinion, is not living up to His advertising...The Almighty appears to be unaware, powerless, and/or a misanthropic absentee landlord who is totally indifferent."<sup>2</sup> More recently Andrew Cuomo, the governor of New York, dismissed the notion of God's help in the face of the CoronaVirus, announcing that the number of new infections were down, and it had nothing to do with God. "God did not do that. Faith did not do that. Destiny did not do that. ... A lot of pain and suffering did that. ... That is how it works. It's simple math."<sup>3</sup>

In 1981 Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a little book that became an acclaimed national bestseller.<sup>4</sup> The book grew out of Kushner's own personal loss in the death of his son, who was born with a rare disease that

eventually took his life at age fourteen. Kushner begins by saying that he had grown up with an image of God as an all-wise, all-powerful parent figure who would treat us as our earthly dad, or even better. If we were obedient and deserving, He would reward us. If we got out of line, He would discipline us, reluctantly but firmly. He would protect us from being hurt or from hurting ourselves, and would see to it that we got what we deserved in life (p. 3). As a result of his son's death, Kushner's already garbled understanding of God underwent a dramatic change. He concluded that God was not really God-like; He made mistakes; He could not prevent evil from happening; God was in fact a very limited being. Kushner summarizes his view with these words, "The author (of the book of Job) . . . takes the position which neither Job nor his friends take. He believes in God's goodness and Job's goodness and is prepared to give up his belief in proposition (a): that God is all-powerful. Bad things do happen to good people in this world, but it is not God who wills it. God would like people to get what they deserve in life, but He cannot always arrange it. Forced to choose between a Good God who is not totally powerful, or a powerful God who is not totally good, the author of the book of Job chooses to believe in God's goodness" (p. 42). Kushner concluded his own book by saying, "Are you capable of forgiving and loving God even when you have found out that He has let you down and disappointed you by permitting bad luck and sickness and cruelty in His world, and permitting some of those things to happen to you? Can you learn to love and forgive Him despite His limitations, as Job does, and as you once learned to forgive and love your parents even though they were not as wise, as strong, or as perfect as you needed them to be?" (p. 148).

More recently a group of professed evangelicals who identify themselves as "Open-View" theists<sup>5</sup> have also adopted a similar position. Clark Pinnock echoed Kushner when he wrote, "God cannot be perplexed but suffers with His people. God's power is limitless but is deployed in ways that may appear weak. God is not subject to change or decay but can relate to temporal passage. God knows everything but is still learning what the world is becoming. The Open View of God stresses qualities of generosity, sensitivity, and vulnerability more than power and control. It allows us to think of God as taking risks. Instead of locating God above and beyond history, it stresses God's activity in history, responding to events as they happen, in order to accomplish His purposes. Rather than deciding the future all by Himself, God made creatures with the capacity to surprise and delight Him. Like a loving parent, He rejoices with them when they are happy and suffers with them when they are in pain. In and through everything, God is committed to their welfare and continually works to achieve what is best for them."<sup>6</sup> Open View theist John Sanders adds, "In my view, God does seek to bring good even out of tragedy, but there are no guarantees. God is working in the lives of those who love God to redeem even evil situations and bring forth something good (Rom. 8:28). But contrary to specific sovereignty, the God of general sovereignty cannot ensure that people who are suffering will respond positively to His redemptive love. Given the fellowship model of providence wherein God does not force His will on us, it is possible that we thwart God's attempts to redeem suffering in our lives. Considering the personal aspects of the divine-human relationship, though God works to bring good out of evil, God cannot guarantee that a greater good will arise out of each and every occurrence of evil."<sup>7</sup>

This is a profoundly different portrait of God than is pictured for us in Scripture. The god of Rabbi Kushner and Open View theism, as Carson rightly points out, "cannot offer us any comfort. Belief in an omnipotent God brings with it all sorts of hard questions about how such a God, if He is good, can permit evil and suffering, but it also brings with it the promises of help, relief, an answer, an eschatological prospect. To abandon belief in the omnipotence of God may 'solve' the problem of evil, but the cost is enormous: the resulting god is incapable of helping us. He may be able to forgive us and give us quite a bit of sympathy, and even groan along with us; but he clearly cannot *help* us - not now, and not in the future. There is no point praying to such a god and asking for his help. He is already doing the best he can, poor chap, but he has reached the end of his resources. For all that one sympathizes with Kushner's search for a God he can respect, he has ended up with a god who cannot help."<sup>8</sup> How can God be good when He permits (or does) things that seem so destructive and hurtful to human beings? Surely if *we* had the power to prevent an earthquake, we would have done so. Just think of the children who are made orphans when a pandemic or natural disaster strikes, the new widows and widowers, the depleted resources, and the fresh graves. Should we charge God with evil? Or is God simply unable to prevent evil? The Bible pictures a Sovereign Lord of all creation. Note the following texts: "The Lord said to him, 'Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him *deaf* or *mute*? Who gives him *sight* or makes him *blind*? Is it not I, the Lord?'" (Ex. 4:11). "See now that I myself am He! There is

no god besides Me. I put to *death* and I bring to *life*, I have *wounded* and I will *heal*, and no one can deliver out of My hand” (Deut. 32:39). “The Lord brings *death* and makes *alive*, He brings down to the *grave* and *raises* up. The Lord sends *poverty* and *wealth*; He *humbles* and He *exalts*” (I Sam. 2:6-7). “Consider what God has done: Who can *straighten* what He has made *crooked*? When *times are good*, be happy; but when *times are bad*, consider: *God has made the one as well as the other*. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future” (Eccl. 7:13-14). “I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from Me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged Me, so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form the *light* and create *darkness*, I bring *prosperity* and create *disaster*; I, the Lord, *do all these things*” (Isa. 45:5-7). “Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand. . . . For the Lord Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart Him?” (Isa. 14:24, 27). “I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: ‘My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.’ . . . What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do” (Isa. 46:19). “Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both *calamities* and *good things* come?” (Lam. 3:37-38). “When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When *disaster* comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?” (Amos 3:6). “The lot is cast into the lap, but *its every decision* is from the Lord” (Prov. 16:33). “And He made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment - to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. In Him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who *works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will*” (Eph. 1:9-11).

In light of the CoronaVirus and events like hurricane Katrina and 9/11, how should Christians respond to the LPE? Are we caught in a hopeless dilemma? The response of religious people like Kushner and the misguided Open-View theists is unacceptable in light of the Bible’s picture of God’s sovereignty. There are no *easy* answers, but surely there is a better way of looking at this circumambient<sup>9</sup> mystery. Two passages from the Gospel of Luke are instructive (6:46-49 and 13:1-5).

## ***I. WE LIVE IN A FALLEN WORLD AND AS SUCH CANNOT ESCAPE EVIL AND SUFFERING***

Paul’s language in Romans 8:18-22 underscores the fact that the created order lies under the effects of the Fall, and, as such, produces suffering for those who are part of the created order. This would include the animal kingdom, which, as Alfred Lord Tennyson reminds us, is “red in tooth and claw,” as well as humanity. The notion we oftentimes unrealistically assume, that “they lived happily ever after”, belongs at the end of fairy tales and not in the *real* world. If you doubt this, you are (1) ignorant of the world we all have to face daily; (2) not old enough yet, for certainly if you live long enough this will become obvious; (3) hopelessly naive; or (4) some combination of the previous points. In Luke 13:1-14 we find two examples that would be described as “natural evil” and “moral evil”.

### ***A. Those who suffer from these things were not more deserving of their fate than others.***

This was the mistake that Job’s three “miserable comforters” concluded. All they offered were glib answers and a condemning, censorious smug attitude (see Job 4:7-8). The same mindset was even evident in Jesus’ own disciples (see John 9:1).

### ***B. Jesus uses these as illustrations, as incentives for personal and collective repentance.***

“It is as if He is saying that God uses disaster as a megaphone to call attention to our guilt and destination, to the imminence of His righteous judgment if He sees no repentance. This is an argument developed at great length in Amos 4. Disaster is a call to repentance. Jesus might have added (as He does elsewhere) that peace and tranquility, which we do not deserve, show us God’s goodness and forbearance. It is a mark of our lostness that we invert these two. We think we deserve the times of blessing and prosperity, and that the times of war and disaster are not only unfair but come perilously close to calling into question God’s goodness or His power - even, perhaps, His very existence. Jesus simply does not see it that way. If we are to adopt His mind, we have some fundamental realignments to make in our assessment of ourselves.”<sup>10</sup> What does this involve?

- II. *GOD DOES NOT OPERATE ON HUMAN STANDARDS.*** If you were standing beside a swimming pool and watched a toddler fall in and did not pull the child out, your negligence would be cause for prosecution. Yet God watches children drown or, for that matter, starve every day and does not intervene. You will sometimes hear Christians talk about their “guardian Angels” whom, they claim, have the responsibility to deliver them out of potentially dangerous circumstances. But the Bible does not sanction such a belief. Acts 5:19 and 12:7 tell of the Apostles being delivered from jail with the help of angels, but it is pure speculation to suggest that everybody has an angel assigned to protect them.<sup>11</sup> The texts we have cited teach that God sends drought, creating scarcity of food; He sends tidal waves, wiping out homes and crops; and worldwide pandemics that afflict millions in a matter of months. We are obligated to keep people alive as long as possible; if God were held to that standard, no one would ever die. He could keep the whole population of the world alive indefinitely. What for us would be criminal is for God an everyday occurrence. Why the difference? He is the Creator; we are the creatures. Because He is the giver of life, He also has the right to take life. He has a long-term agenda that is much more complex than keeping people alive as long as possible. Death and destruction are a part of His plan. “‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,’ declares the LORD, ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.’” (Isa. 55:8-9). Erwin Lutzer poses this question, “Did you ever realize that not all of the Ten Commandments apply to God? For example, He cannot steal, for He owns everything. He does not bear false witness, but having neither father or mother; He must of necessity honor only Himself. God does not often strike a person dead, (as He did with Herod, see Acts 12:23), but through disease, disaster, and various calamities He does take human life regularly, daily, hourly.”<sup>12</sup>
- III. *GOD’S DEALINGS WITH HUMANITY ARE LONG TERM.*** Final rewards and punishments are *not* meted out in this life (Ps. 75). The Bible clearly teaches that God’s people endure great suffering (Heb. 11:35-38). God is both good and omnipotent (see Acts 14:16-17), but He always acts from the standpoint of eternity rather than time; He makes all decisions with an infinite perspective. But of this you can be sure, God will punish and reward (II Cor. 5:10). We believe that God has a good and all wise purpose for even the grief we suffer. Indeed, John Piper contends that “He had hundreds of thousands of purposes, most of which will remain hidden to us until we are able to grasp them at the end of the age.”<sup>13</sup>
- IV. *GOD DOES NOT DELIGHT IN HUMAN SUFFERING.*** This would be inconsistent with His basic nature of loving His creation. But God’s love is primarily, *redemptive* love and *not* a sentimental love that we too often ascribe to Him. It is at this point that our understanding of God’s character is shaped more by popular opinion than Biblical theology.<sup>14</sup> Kushner’s book is a prime example of this. “There is,” as Douglas Hall points out, “a conspicuous absence of love in Kushner’s discussion of God and human suffering.”<sup>15</sup> But God does take delight in executing His judgments. Moses told the Israelites the consequences if they sinned: “Just as it pleased the Lord to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please Him to ruin and destroy you. You will be uprooted from the land you are entering to possess” (Deut. 28:63). The reason is obvious: He delights in defending His glory - He is jealous that this happens. Contrary to popular opinion (as represented by Rabbi Kushner), “good” people do not populate this planet. Kushner has a very odd notion of “good” because he has a very truncated conception of sin. Morally, Job may indeed be a “good” man. But, as the speech out of the whirlwind later indicates (Job chapters 38-42), there is a sense in which none of us, no matter how (comparatively!) good we are, can stand before the Holy One without guilt (cf. Job’s reaction to that of Isaiah in Isaiah 6:1-7). This sense of our own unworthiness is grounded in the Old Testament. Isaiah’s temple vision understood it very well; and the modern Jewish author of *The Trial* (Franz Kafka) understood it at least as well as did that ancient Jewish convert to Christianity, Paul, who emphatically taught that, “There is no one who does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:12).
- V. *GOD IS NOT SUBJECT TO OUR EXPECTATIONS OR JUDGMENTS.*** As finite beings, we cannot judge an infinite being. Listen to the words of the English poet John Donne, who gave us the famous

line, “Ask not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee,”<sup>16</sup> and who also made this equally profound statement, “You must have a very mean and unworthy estimate of God if you stipulate that He ought to behave as you yourself would behave if you were God!” God is not obligated to tell us all what He is up to, as the Apostle Paul forcefully declares in Romans 9:20, “Who are you, O man, to answer back to God?” It is not necessary for us to see God’s eternal purposes in order for us to believe that He has such a plan and that He knows what He is doing. As Paul reminded an imaginary objector to God’s sovereignty, the clay has no right to judge the potter. It is not necessary for us to know God’s purposes before we bow before His authority. And the fact that we trust God though He has not revealed the details to us is something that delights His heart. “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb. 11:6). Christians undergoing pain and suffering will be well served by contemplating the Bible’s storyline and meditating on the price of sin. We live in an age where everyone is concerned about their “rights”. But there is a profound sense in which our “rights” before God have been sacrificed by our sin. “If in fact we believe,” observes Carson, “that our sin properly deserves the wrath of God, then when we experience the sufferings of this world, including the consequences of human rebellion, we will be less quick to blame God and a lot quicker to recognize that we have no fundamental right to expect a life of unbroken ease and comfort. From the biblical perspective, it is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed. Most emphatically, this does not mean that every bit of suffering is the immediate consequence of a particular sin. That is a hideous piece of heresy, capable of inflicting untold mental anguish. It would mean that people who suffer the most in this world must be those who have sinned the most in this world; and that is demonstrably untrue, both in the Bible and in experience. It is enough to observe that illness *can* be the direct result of a specific sin (as in the case of those described in I Cor. 11:27-34; or in the case of the man in John 5:1-15 who was paralyzed for thirty-eight years), but there is no *necessary* connection between a specific sin and a particular spell of suffering (e.g., the man born blind, John 9).”<sup>17</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** I conclude with the observation of one of my esteemed professors at Westminster Theological Seminary, Cornelius Van Til. He argues that there is a striking parallel between the fallenness of humanity and sin-cursed creation. “They go through a similar history; they go together through the same history. They are aspects of the one course of events reaching toward the great climax at the end of the age. Both were originally created good. But it was a good that was on the move. Through the fall of man both came under the wrath of God. Nature as well as man is subject to vanity and corruption (Romans 8:19, 22). But the vanity and corruption, which rest on man and nature by the curse of God, are also on the move. We must observe the ‘tendency’ in both if we would describe either for what it is. Men ought, says Calvin, to be able to see the Creator’s munificence in creation (*Institutes*, I, V, i). Men ought, in the second place, to see God’s wrath upon nature. ‘For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness’ (Romans 1:18). ‘The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now’ (Romans 8:22). Thus there is a downward tendency in creation. Men ought to conclude, argues Calvin, that history will end in judgment. When they do not see their own sins punished as they deserve to be punished, men ought to conclude that punishment is deferred, not that it is not coming. Thus there is a tendency toward a climax of wrath and a deferment of this climax in order that the climax may truly be a climax, the end of a process. On the other hand, there is a tendency toward glory. The ‘earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God’ (Romans 8:19). In the ‘regeneration of all things’ the vanity and the corruption will be swallowed up in victory.”<sup>18</sup> The victory that Van Til was referring to was accomplished by Christ’s redemptive sufferings on the Cross.

## Endnotes

1. [www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com), Sept. 7, 2005.
2. An editorial in the Sept. 6, 2005 *Mesa Tribune*.
3. Amanda Prestigiaco, *The DailyWire*, “Cuomo Boasts of Low COVID Infections: ‘God Did Not Do That’” April 14, 2020, accessed at <https://www.dailywire.com/news/cuomo-boasts-of-low-covid-infections-god-did-not-do-that>
4. H.S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (Avon Books, 1981). The book carried a glowing endorsement from the

late Norman Vincent Peal, the mentor of Robert Schuller, and others who espouse “the power of positive thinking” which is still so popular today in much that calls itself evangelicalism.

5. Open-View theism holds that God does not know the future. He *learns* as events unfold and therefore is often surprised and disappointed by events like the CoronaVirus and other natural disasters. For an extended analysis and refutation, see my series of sermons on *The Doctrine of God* (2001).

6. C. Pinnock, *The Openness of God* (IVP, 1994), p. 123.

7. J. Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (IVP, 1998), P. 263.

8. D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Baker, 1990), p. 156.

9. The word circumambient comes from the Latin *circum*, “about” or “around” and *ambulare*, to “walk”. Thus the word means something that is all encompassing. (Scrabble anyone?)

10. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

11. See the very helpful discussion on this subject in S.F. Noll, *Angels of Light, Powers of Darkness: Thinking Biblically About Angels, Satan & Principalities* (IVP, 1998), esp. pp. 170-172.

12. E. W. Lutzer, *Ten Lies About God and How You Might Already Be Deceived* (Word, 2000), p. 110. I am indebted to Lutzer for my analysis of this section.

13. J. Piper, *World Magazine* (Sept. 4, 1999), p. 33.

14. C. S. Lewis, in his helpful book, *The Problem of Pain* (McMillian, 1940), writes in reference to God’s love that it “is not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, not the cold philanthropy of a conscientious magistrate, nor the care of a host who feels responsible for the comfort of his guests, but the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds; persistent as the artist’s love for his work and despotic as a man’s love for a dog; provident and venerable as a father’s love for a child; jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes” (p. 35).

15. D. J. Hall, *God & Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Augsburg, 1986), p. 156.

16. John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions and Severall Steps in my Sicknes*, Meditation XVII (London: Thomas Iones, 1624), p. 8).

17. Carson, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

18. C. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (P&R, 1972), p. 92.