

175 and Counting: God, Suffering and Evil

Genesis 50:20

By **[Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III](#)**

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Genesis chapter 50 verse 20. We're going to be looking at four passages this morning, one in Genesis 3, the one here in Genesis 50, then one in Acts chapter 2, and in Romans 8, but we want to begin with Genesis 50 verse 20, and you'll understand why in just a few moments.

Perhaps you have heard or read literature in which atheists or skeptics or unbelievers have questioned the truth claims of the Bible or of Christianity or have denied the existence of God because of the problem of evil. The argument goes something like this: How can you believe that there is a sovereign God who is also good since there is evil in this world? Doesn't evil call into question the existence of a Being who is all-powerful and all-good? Or maybe you've encountered this question at a much more personal level. A dear friend who has been undergoing and experiencing great suffering, or perhaps a dear friend who has someone who she or he loves who is undergoing great sufferings and questioning not simply, "Where is God in all of this?" but whether there is a God in all this. We want to address that question today from the Scriptures and so before we read God's Word, let's pray.

Heavenly Father, this is Your Word. We recognize that we are dealing with a hard thing today, for suffering and evil are not abstract, theoretical things. They are very real, they are unspeakably painful, and we are involved in all that they entail. We do not study these things as armchair theologians but as combatants on the battlefield of life. So we come to Your Word today with desperation, needing to hear a word from You. Give us that word, O Lord. Open our eyes to see it, our ears to hear it, our hearts to receive and believe it, in Jesus' name, amen.

In Genesis 50 verse 20, Joseph is speaking to his brothers who are afraid that he is about to extract vengeance on them because of what they have done to him in first threatening to kill him and then in selling him into slavery, and he says these words. Hear the word of God:

"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."

Amen, thus far God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

Have you ever found yourself in a conversation with an acquaintance or even a dear friend, someone that you love, someone who you respect, someone that you care about, who is wrestling with precisely this issue? How could there be an all-powerful and good God in a world filled with sin? How could He have allowed that? And very often they're asking that question not out of curiosity, not playing sort of sophomore-philosophy games with you; they're speaking out of a definite experience. Perhaps it has been an experience of great, personal loss; perhaps it has been watching someone that they love endure almost indescribable evil and suffering, and out of that they begin to question whether they can believe in God, whether there is a God - How could there be a God when things are like they are? Have you had that conversation? How do you go about speaking to that friend respectfully, helpfully, clearly, Biblically?

I want us to take that friend's question seriously together for a few moments and I'd like you to understand that many skeptics and many atheists, precisely because of this question, reject the existence of God and it's not a new thing. Actually you can go back over two thousand years to the philosopher, Epicurus, from which we get the name epicurean, who wrestled with this, and he gave us a little epigram to describe it. He says: "Is God willing to prevent evil but not able? Then He is impotent. Is He able but not willing? Then He is malevolent. Is He both able and willing? Then He is evil." Do you see what Epicurus was saying? He was saying that if God is all-powerful and evil exists then He must not be all good. And if He's all good and evil exists then He must not be all-powerful. But if He is as you claim, all-powerful and all-good, how do you explain that there is evil in this world? And if you have read or heard any debates between atheists and deists or between skeptics and Christians, you have almost certainly heard this question come up and it is played as the trump card against belief in God, the trump card against Christianity, the trump card against the Bible. "Where, Christian, does evil come from if your God really is sovereign and good?"

Well I want to say today that the atheist actually has a harder problem than the believer does with that question because suffering and evil are bigger problems to the atheist's worldview than they are to the claims of Scripture. Let me explain why I say that. Because in a universe without God there are no and there can be no moral absolutes. There are no absolute rights and wrongs. And so there are no satisfactory objective ways of distinguishing between good and evil and so nothing, absolutely nothing, can be called good or evil. Good and evil is simply an arbitrary assertion of individual or community self-assertion. They are social constructs. In other words, we decide that this is good or this is evil either individually or socially and there's nothing absolute in the universe that leads us to that conclusion. And you understand that leads the unbeliever, the skeptic, the atheist with a bigger problem than you have in answering the question, "Where

does evil come from?" because in the atheist world, evil doesn't exist. And yet every human on this planet knows and understands when she or he encounters evil that it does exist. But the atheist's worldview has no way to account for that. All you can say is, "I don't like that." You can't say, "It's wrong. It's evil. It ought not to be." And so actually the harder problem is the existence of evil to the unbeliever, to the skeptic, to the atheist rather than the answer that the believer gives to that question.

That is a hard question and I don't want to make light of the work that the believer has to do in giving an answer to that question. We'll do that a little bit at the end of the message today. I want to chart out four things that the Bible says about suffering and evil to help you understand how a believer begins to answer that question, but understand that there are lots of mysteries in how we answer that question and that's okay. We say that as finite beings we believe in an infinite God. It shouldn't be surprising to us that there are some things that we don't understand, right? I mean, if we understood them all either God's not infinite or the Bible's wrong, or both. So it shouldn't surprise us that there are things that we have to say, "I don't know" to.

When I was twenty-nine years old and teaching at the seminary my first year I was scared to death about answering questions and I was scared to death about answering questions for several reasons. One was I was printing my lectures out on a dot matrix printer. Remember those things? Like three minutes before I walked into class. And I was just scared to death of just being able to keep up with these students, some of whom were older than I was and had more life experience. The other thing is I was concerned about knuckle-headed questions. You know, you always have one guy in the class who wants to teach everybody else that he knows more than everybody else and the teacher included, and I didn't want that to happen. And so I called up one of my former professors and I said, "Dr. Robertson, I am thinking of not taking questions in class." And he said, "Lig, don't do that, for two reasons. One, though there will be some bad questions and though there will be some questions where a student wants to lecture the rest of the class under the guise of a question and there will be some questions where the student wants to show you that he knows more than you do, you will learn a lot from many questions you are asked because they will send you back to your study having to work to give good answers to them. Secondly, you will have to say the words, 'I don't know' a lot," and he said, "That will be good for you, for your humility, and it will be good for your students because all of us, because we're finite beings in this fallen world, have to say, 'I don't know' sometimes." So I'm not belittling the question, but I am saying I don't have to know everything for Christianity to be true.

Now there's another way, you understand, that this question is asked as well. It's not just an abstract. We've been asking it kind of like a philosophical question. We went back to Epicurus. We quoted modern-day skeptics and atheists, but sometimes this question gets asked in a profoundly more personal way. A person

experiences suffering and he or she is so offended by that very experience, is so traumatized by that experienced, that in a very, in a very personal way, that person lashes out at God and denies the Scripture and denies Christianity because of the offense of suffering. You know it's been said that atheists don't believe in God and they're furious with Him. You know, "You don't exist and I hate You!" And you have to ask yourself the question, "What is it that makes someone so angry with someone that they claim not to believe exists?" That's actually a very, very good question.

And you encounter that kind of a person in Bart Ehrman. Some of you have heard, maybe even read, Bart Ehrman. Bart Ehrman is a professor of religion at the University of North Carolina. He grew up an evangelical Christian; he went to Princeton Theological Seminary and he lost his faith. And he has devoted much of his scholarly career to trying to undermine the faith of others. But he wrote a book a few years ago called, *God's Problem*. The subtitle is: *How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question — Why We Suffer*. And he tells you in the book this is the issue for him: "The God of the Bible did miracles for people, but where is He today when your son is killed in a car accident or your husband is diagnosed with multiple sclerosis? I do not see anything redemptive when Ethiopian babies die of malnutrition." It is very personal, his argument. He has clearly been offended by the suffering and evil of this world and he has come to conclude that he can no longer believe in God.

THE REASON THAT THERE IS SUFFERING IN THE WORLD

Do we have anything to say to that? Yes, four very important things we have to say to that. The first one is this. Let me take you back to Genesis 3 and just allow your eyes to scan across verses 1 to 8. Moses tells us in Genesis 1 and 2 that God created this world good and pronounced it very good, but in Genesis 3, through the rebellion of Eve and Adam, through their unbelief, through their pride, and their idolatry, this world was plunged into sin. And in telling you that, Moses is telling you the first of four things that the Bible teaches about suffering and evil that changed the way a Christian experiences and responds to evil and suffering in this world. And what Moses is telling you is this. We are the reason that there is evil in our world. We let it in. It is very important for us to understand this because we can't even approach this question and distance ourselves from it. We're involved in it.

I was reading in preparation for another sermon in William Plumer's commentary on the Psalms and I ran across this quote. He says, "Every sigh and groan from earth or hell, every cry wrung from distress of conscience is the fruit of sin. Sin has digged every grave, built every prison, even hell itself." You see what Plumer is saying? He's saying that every evil in this world that we experience is the result of our letting sin into this world, our bringing sin into this world. And therefore we cannot analyze this like we would study a caterpillar or photosynthesis. We are

involved in this personally. We can't even get outside our own sin to ask the question, "How can God, who is sovereign and good, allow for evil to come into this world?" because we're involved in that sin itself and that sin itself blinds our minds.

I've shared with you before about a conversation that has stuck with me for most of my life with Nancy. She was a student in my high school youth group in St. Louis — brilliant; a Vanderbilt graduate; a wonderful mother and wife; lives in Nashville, Tennessee now. We were having a discussion after a Wednesday night Bible study and she was wrestling with the doctrine of hell. And the reason that she was wrestling with the doctrine of hell is because she could not understand how a good and loving God could be associated with eternal, conscious suffering and torment. And we were wrestling with that and we were looking at the Scriptures together. Now there were many reasons why she was wrestling with that. You need to understand that the main one was this. At that time her father was not a Christian and for her it was a very personal question. This was no speculation. This was no philosophical playing around. This question concerned a man that she loved with all her heart, her dad.

And as we talked about it I saw that I was getting nowhere and towards the end of the conversation I said, "Let me ask you a question, Nancy. Do you think that God is sovereign and good?" She said, "Yes, I do. I believe that. The Bible teaches that." And I said, "Has your experience been that God is good to you." "Yes, He saved me and I didn't deserve to be saved. I know that God is good." "And Nancy, are you a sinner?" "Yes, I am. I sin every day." "So can I rephrase your question? You're worried that it is wrong for there to be a hell because of eternal, conscious suffering. You believe that God is sovereign and good. You acknowledge that you are not good and you do things wrong every day, but you, who do things wrong every day, are worried that God would do something wrong. Am I understanding you?" And she stepped back and she smiled and she said, "It's kind of stupid isn't it?" And I said, "No, Nancy. All of us think like that, all of us."

When we ask this question about suffering and evil and the word, "why" starts to come out of our mouth, we are all already thinking we are smarter and better than God, all of us, not you, but me and all of us. Moses, in Genesis 3, wants to close our mouths when we start to hurl that accusation at God by saying, "You are the man, you are the woman, you are the man. You brought sin into this world." That's very important for us to understand when we wrestle with this question. We're involved in it. This isn't an abstract, philosophical, speculative question for us. This is real.

GOD IS SOVEREIGN OVER SUFFERING

Secondly, now turn back to the end of Genesis, Genesis 50 verse 20. The

second thing we learn about suffering is this. God is sovereign over it. God is sovereign over suffering; God is sovereign over evil. You remember the story of Joseph. Joseph's brothers hated him. They were jealous of him, and they planned to murder him. But one of the brothers couldn't go through with it and so instead of murdering him they dropped back to "Plan B" and they sold him into slavery. And he was sent with a band of Bedouins down to Egypt where he remained for many years, was thrown in prison, and eventually rose all the way to the right hand of the Pharaoh. And after a famine, all of Joseph's brothers came to Egypt and they were afraid that when his father died, then was going to be his chance for some sweet payback. And so they come to him terrified that he's going to kill them all. And he says to them, "You don't understand. What you did, you meant for evil against me, but God meant it for good to bring about that many people should be kept alive as they are today." Do you hear what Joseph just said? In the same act that was meant by his brothers for evil, God was working for, not only Joseph's good and not only a multitude of people alive that day to keep them alive, but for millions and millions and billions of people. You understand this is part of the plan of salvation and if God doesn't do this the fruition of His plan does not come to pass. And so in this evil event, the turmoil in a family that leads to a murderous heart, the selling of a brother into slavery, God is right in the middle of that using what they mean for evil, for good.

God is sovereign over evil. Martin Luther put this in a provocative way. You won't be surprised that Martin Luther put it in a provocative way. He said, "You have to remember that the devil is God's devil." The devil is no co-equal to God. God is sovereign even over the purposes of the devil. Derek Kidner makes the assertion that this verse is the most important theological assertion in the whole book of Genesis. Now that's a pretty big claim and you and I could debate that until the cows come home. But it is certainly true that Moses is making a major claim here. And what does it do? It changes the way that Joseph understands his suffering. Suddenly, his suffering is no longer meaningless, it's meaningful. And that's what no atheist, no skeptic, no unbeliever can have. You cannot have meaningful suffering apart from God, but with God, because He is sovereign, we can be assured there is no meaningless suffering. God does not waste your suffering.

And that kept Joseph from being what? It kept him from being bitter. Have you ever seen a person who's gone through suffering and they're embittered? And you've seen another person who's gone through the same and worse and they're not? I'll bet you that one of the differences that you will find between those two people is that the one who is not embittered believes that there is a God who is in charge and He does not waste suffering. We learn that from Genesis 50:20.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND THE GOSPEL

But following on that we learn a third thing. Turn with me to Acts chapter 2 verse

22. Peter is getting ready to preach to the assembled multitudes at Pentecost and in Acts chapter 2 he says these words, “Men of Israel, hear these words:” verse 22, “Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves know — this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” Did you hear what Peter just said? You are responsible for the crucifixion of the Messiah, the Son of God. You are responsible for the most evil event that ever occurred in the history of this world. And God predestined and predetermined and foreordained that event to save the world. You’re guilty; God used it for salvation. What we are being taught there is that God is not only sovereign over evil, He will triumph over it and He will make everything right and He’ll do it through Jesus and He’ll do it through the Gospel.

Do you realize that right at the center of this Gospel that we preach and proclaim week in and week out here is this very issue of evil and the sovereignty of God. The most evil event in the universe, we are celebrating this week as Christians. The most evil event in the universe we are celebrating this week. Christians around the world are celebrating. Why? Because it was God's purpose to redeem the world through it. You don't think God is sovereign over evil? You think about the cross a little bit. And that's why, as we talk with dear friends that we love, we want to take them back to the Gospel because only at the cross does this question ever make sense. You can't understand the right answer to this question, you can't get any relief from the pain of this question until you come to the foot of the cross and reckon with Christ and reckon with the Gospel because the King that we sang about coming into Jerusalem this morning in the first hymn and hearing the cries of children, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” came to Jerusalem to suffer and die. That is the King that we love and serve. He came to suffer and die and in that He showed us that there is not one ounce of our suffering that God intends to waste.

GOD FORCES EVIL TO SERVE HIS GLORY AND OUR GOOD

Now there's one last thing and it follows on this. You'll see it in Romans 8:28. God forces even evil to serve His glory and our good. What does Paul say? “God works all things, God causes all things to work together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.” What's he saying? “I make everything serve the end of your good, everything, without exception, everything.” With those four truths, with an experience of the grace that has been given to us by God at the cross, believers have, for two millennia, have looked at evil and suffering and said, “You will not have the last word. And nothing can separate me from the love of God which is in Christ. And even this which you have designed against me, He will use for good.” Did you catch that in the reading this morning? Did you catch that in the reading from the book of Revelation as God speaks to the church that's about to undergo suffering,

poverty, and persecution? Go back and read those first seven verses that Josh read this morning. It's right there. Jesus telling the church, "You're going to have a crown, a crown of life, after you've gone through that suffering because God's not going to waste your suffering." No, Christianity is not overthrown by suffering and evil. Only Christianity explains that there is evil, and it's not just our preference, it's evil. We don't just prefer to call it evil or good; it is evil or good. And Christianity redeems suffering from meaninglessness and nothing else can.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for this opportunity to wrestle together with Your Word about a painful but universal experience. There's no one in this room that hasn't sinned, there's no one in this room that hasn't been sinned against, and therefore there is no one in this room who has not experienced suffering or caused suffering, and so this is a very personal question because there are some people here who have experienced suffering that is almost unspeakable. To them, Lord, give hope, confidence from Your Word. And as we bear witness to Christ in this world, give us confidence in that Word too, and a hope in our hearts that will never go out. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

It's appropriate that we end by singing number 128, "God Moves In a Mysterious Way."

And when He gives us this blessing He makes it plain to us. Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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