

Suffering and Sovereignty, Week 1

“The Sovereignty of God”, chapter 6 of *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering* by Tim Keller

Summary: According to Keller, the Bible holds two contrasting truths in tension: Suffering is both just and unjust, and God is both sovereign and suffering. In chapter 6 he addresses the first three of these.

1. Read the material on the back side of this sheet. Are there omissions? What patterns do you see? Are there any surprises or perspectives which tend to be neglected? Which of these, if any, most resonates with your attempts to reconcile human suffering with God’s loving nature and sovereignty?
2. Keller says that, according to Proverbs, “certain behavior goes against the grain of the universe, violating God’s moral order as much as trying to fly off a cliff violates the law of gravity” (132). Later (134) he adds, “Faithfulness, integrity, unselfish service, and love are not only right but wise, because they fit the fabric of reality.” Is this an eloquent way of saying that human nature means that bad people tend to get what’s coming to them, at the hands of other people? Or is there something deeper at work?
3. Keller, discussing Job, says that “God appears [at the end] and insists that the moral order of the universe is still intact, but it is in large part hidden from human eyes... Much suffering is mysterious and unjust” (135). Is it a comfort that God wills you be kept in the dark when you are at your darkest times? Is that what Job and Keller are saying?
4. Talking about “suffering as the enemy of God”, Keller quotes Hart as saying,

As for comfort, when we seek it, I can imagine none greater than the happy knowledge that when I see the death of a child I do not see the face of God, but the face of His enemy. It is... a faith that... have set us free from optimism, and taught hope instead” (136).

Contrast this with the “death is a part of life” view held by many. Are Keller and Hart ruling out a sense of peace at a funeral?

5. Why must we, and all of creation, suffer for Adam and Eve’s sin? And if the sin is ours, knit into our nature, why are we held responsible for a nature we didn’t create? And if we are truly free *not* to sin, why do we need Jesus?
6. What, according to Keller, keeps us from falling into the twin abysses of anger at God (“I hate thee”) and “devastating guilt and a sense of personal failure” at our own sin and the suffering it creates (“I hate me”)? (139)
7. God is and isn’t responsible for the wicked acts of men. Huh? How? When you see someone die young of a terrible disease, does any part of you feel angry at God?
8. Read Russ’ and Sue’s story (p. 144). What brought them comfort? Was it cheap comfort? Was it biblical?

Some Things the Bible Says About Suffering

Genesis: Satan and sin have broken God's good creation and we suffer until the snake-crusher comes. Imitate Abraham and Sarah and *trust* by doing.

Exodus: God rescues his people and is with them in the desert and has a plan for salvation. Turn away from God and expect more time in the desert.

Deuteronomy: Pursue God and know his blessings; turn from him and suffer. But even in suffering God will send a Prophet.

Judges: People are wicked most of the time and their best leaders deeply flawed.

Proverbs: Live in light of God's existence and nature and you will minimize your suffering... at least to first order

Ecclesiastes: Second-order happens more than Proverbs thinks. Drink some wine and take comfort in loved ones.

Job: God has the big picture and is just and loving even if it doesn't appear that way. Oh, and a good friend would make it all a lot easier, huh?

Psalms: Adds other lessons, such as what to do when God's face is hidden and you are suffering spiritual depression (Pss 42-43). Also, immerse yourself in who God is and you'll be glad you did (Ps 119). And Pss of lament: we lament because we know our suffering is in jarring contrast with God's loving nature and promises.

Prophets: God has a plan to deal with suffering, and what is true now will not necessarily be true in the future (Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah). God will be faithful to us even though we aren't faithful to him (Hosea). God uses the wicked to carry out his plans, but don't worry—the wicked will get theirs too (Habakkuk). God remembers the plan even when we forget, and walks with us in suffering (Daniel).

Matthew: The sorrowful will be comforted and the meek exalted (beatitudes). God's addressing suffering through the kingdom he's establishing, which will start small and grow big (parable of mustard seed), by spreading a message to individuals (sower), growing inscrutably on its own (growing seed) and bringing great joy (pearl and hidden treasure). Satan and wicked people bring suffering which God tolerates for the sake of those who are trying to follow him (weeds). When you suffer, pray (unjust judge, friend at midnight). To follow Jesus is to pick up your cross.

Luke: The kingdom's coming and in that kingdom the poor and powerless and shamed are exalted and raised up.

Mark: What they said. Oh, and Jesus was more like us in his humanity than you might think of you just read John.

John: Abide in the true vine; Jesus is our friend and our shepherd; Jesus has been in control from the beginning and knows you.

Romans: God's solution to the broken world and *our very nature* is the atoning sacrifice of his Son which unleashed the amazing power of creation in his Son's followers.

1 Corinthians: We are meant to go through all of life, including suffering, together as a body. And stop being idiots.

2 Corinthians: To minister is to hurt, but this is part of the plan and is how we experience transformation (ch 4). Suffering prepares us for the eternal weight of glory because we look not at what can be seen, the eternal.

Colossians: You have died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

Ephesians: When you feel powerless and afraid know who you are in Christ and experience God's power. God empowers *pleroma*, fullness, and completion as the *homo spiritualis*, the new humanity.

Philippians: I know the secret of being content in all circumstances; to live is Christ and to die is gain. Hint: *kenosis*, made possible because God's in charge.

Philemon: God doesn't take us out of suffering; he walks with us through it. (Also see rest of Bible.)

James: Better be all in, or you are in for a world of hurt.

1 Peter: All flesh is like grass; what lasts is the Word of the Lord; i.e. this too shall pass.

Revelation: When you are drowning, look at the big picture. Suffering is not God's indifference; it's his desperate call to those he loves. It's the slop in the pig's trough which brings the prodigal to his senses.

Leader's Intro:

We all face sorrow and suffering. This week Susan and I learned that the dad of a girl in Josh's class died of a heart attack on Christmas. Her parents were divorced, so she was used to seeing him on weekends, and now she'll never see him again. At the age of 7 she's dealt a blow which will change the rest of her life. If our faith means anything, it must speak into that situation, and to the countless worlds of sadness, loneliness, depression, stress and fear which we find ourselves trapped in during our lives.

What does the Bible say about suffering? Often we approach this like someone asking a doctor for a one-sentence answer to why people feel pain. What's more, there are head and heart answers. It's not enough to satisfy our minds; we have to build a relationship of trust with God. The time to prepare for suffering is long before it comes knocking. So in this series, which is aimed at ~4 weeks, we will look at suffering, and particularly at how we understand human suffering in light of God's sovereignty, with an eye toward practicality rather than abstract answers. The goal of this series is to make sure that the way we think about suffering reflects Jesus' thinking.

To start the ball rolling, it makes sense to review what the Bible says about suffering. Tonight we will discuss Keller's summary of the Bible's approach. We think of Job and Ecclesiastes, but every part of the Bible has something to say about this important topic. So before jumping into Keller I thought we'd glance at what various books of the Bible say about suffering.

Extra questions and observations:

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2. ...
3. ...
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Notes

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I. Background

a. ...

II. Words and Phrases

a. ...

III. Themes

a. ...

IV. Observations

a. ...

V. Questions

a. ...

VI. To do

a. ...