

## Overview Outline

1. Why Does God Allow Suffering?
2. John 16:33—In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.
3. God is not the creator of evil and suffering. These are caused by His creature's sin.
4. Believers feel agony when we experience suffering in life and cry out: Why Lord?
5. Suffering is bad, but God uses it to accomplish good.
6. God will end suffering for His people and judge Satan and those who reject Christ.
7. Our suffering is painfully real, but not worth comparing to what God has in store for Jesus' followers.
8. God is holy, holy, holy. He is not required to defend Himself. He is the Creator, the Lord, the Judge, not we.
9. Scripture says the Lord uses suffering for many positive purposes.
10. God is always doing 10,000 things in your life, and you may be aware of a few.

### **1. Intro: Why Does God Allow Suffering?**

Is God in control of our world troubled by sin, evil, troubles, and trials? What is His purpose? How does Jesus' death and resurrection fit in? Is there hope for a despairing world? This breakout session offers hope and help with difficult questions and hard times. Standing in God's grace and holding fast to His truth strengthens us for Christ-like living and witness before our neighbors, friends, and co-workers.

Draws on:

Apologetics to the Glory of God by John M. Frame, Chapters 6,7 The Problem of Evil, P&R Publishing (1994)

The Doctrine of God (A Theology of Lordship) by John M. Frame, Chapter 9, The Problem of Evil, P&R (2002)

My goal is to help you: Trust in the Lord (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones....Repent and keep on repenting and believe and keep on believing God's good news in Jesus Christ. (Proverbs 3:5-8; Mark 1:15) *Trusting and obeying the Lord leads to better understanding of Him.* We must not demand full understanding before we trust and obey. That's not given to us. We must walk and live by faith, not by sight (2 Cor 5:7). See also Hebrews chapter 11.

Note: Because of time limitations, I often quote only a part of Scripture verses. I quote many translations and sometimes my own. Also because of time limitations, I can't respond questions or comments during the lecture, but am happy to speak with you afterward.

Why Does God Allow Suffering? This is the biggest question for many people. Christians get confused and stumble. Others say they are atheists because they can't answer this. How can there be so much evil in the world if God exists and is all-powerful, all-loving, all-wise, etc.?

Can you believe God makes you breathe? Why did He lose six million Jews?  
(from: The Only Way, by Keith Emerson & Greg Lake, 1971)

## **2. A Key Scripture: John 16:33—In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.**

Trouble = Thlipsis, comes from thlao, meaning press, squash, squeeze, crush.

Means oppression, affliction, tribulation, distress, anguish, persecution, things that burden us.

Anything that brings suffering, sadness, hardship, or disease unto the lives of creatures.

Covers natural disasters like floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes, etc. that cause loss of life or damage property.

Covers pain, grief, suffering caused by the sins of creatures (Satan, Adam + Eve, us, others).

(See use of thlipsis especially in 2 Corinthians.)

The Scriptures are very realistic about human suffering. The Bible contains 1,189 chapters.

The first two chapters contain no sin + death (Gen 1+2, Creation).

The last two chapters contain no sin + death (Rev 21+22, Re-Creation).

All 1187 chapters in between tell of human death, mourning, crying, and pain and the Lord's remedy.

In 1187 chapters, God takes action to save us from sin and its consequences through Christ, His Son.

That's how God answers the problem/question of suffering.

Alistair Begg says the Bible is a book with the answers in back. Only at the end do we see God's remedy.

2 Peter 3:13 In keeping with the Lord's promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

Revelation 21 and 22 show us Eden restored. Rev 22:3-5 No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and His servants will serve Him. They will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

John 16 is part of Jesus' farewell discourse (14-17) to His disciples, on the last night before His crucifixion. Christ speaks about the Holy Spirit's work, the believers' joy and peace, and His victory over the world.

### **So God's answer to the problem of suffering is not an explanation, but Jesus' incarnation.**

Christ's sinless life, His crucifixion and resurrection, His alive-ness and presence with us, and Jesus' returning is God perfect way of rescuing His people.

Satan's defeat by Christ comes in 3 stages: at the Cross; through subsequent history; and at Judgment Day (Rev 19,20)

Likewise, Christians' salvation from sin comes in 3 stages: Christians have been saved (Eph 2:8); we are being saved (1 Cor 1:18); and we will be saved fully and finally at Christ's return (Rom 5:9).

Here's another key Scripture: Col 1:13,14 God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Forgiveness is not all we get, but it's essential to restored fellowship with God. And where the blessings start.

Christ's followers receive benefits in this life, when we die, and at the resurrection (Judgment Day).

See Shorter Catechism 32-38. See my "Package Deal" of all we have in Christ.

### **3. God is not the creator of evil and suffering. These are caused by His creature's sin.**

Genesis 1:1,31 In the beginning God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) created the heavens and the earth....

*The Lord saw all that He had made, and it was very good.*

Satan's fall and temptations and Adam and Eve's disobedience brought God's curse on His creation:

Gen 2:16,17 The Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."

Gen 3:17-19 Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.

Adam + Eve's act of disobedience must have seemed a small thing to them at the time, but it unleashed all the suffering of the whole human race for thousands and thousands of years. Illustration: The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 killed over 200,000 people. Half of the deaths occurred on the first day. And over the next four months, the fallout killed the other half.

**The fallout from Adam's sin in Eden is still being felt and killing people.** Romans 5:12-17 Sin (and all its consequences) and death (and all that leads to death) entered the world through one man (Adam)....For if the many died by the trespass of the one man (Adam), yet God's grace overflows to many by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ!....Those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!

Christ is the great Curse Reverser! C. John "Jack" Miller (1928–1996): Cheer up. You're a lot worse sinner than you ever imagined, but in Jesus Christ, you are more loved by God than you ever have hoped for.

John 3:16-18 For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Jesus Christ is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Again: God's answer to the problem of suffering is not an explanation, but Jesus' incarnation.

Creatures' sin (angels and humans) brought natural disasters, disorder, and chaos. Because of human sin, the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the

present time (Rom 8:22). God will remove this curse only when Jesus consummates His salvation, executes His final judgment, and this present evil age is replaced by the new heaven and new earth, where righteousness dwells (2 Pet 3).

So we must not try to shift blame to the Lord for the consequences of human sin: death, evil, immorality, pain, suffering, wars, crimes, genetic breakdown, and disease. Romans 3:23 All have sinned and fall short of the God's glory. Human selfishness, arrogance, uncaring, hatefulness, abuse, and irresponsibility causes most of the world's problems. Samuel von Pufendorf (1673): More inhumanity has been done by man himself than any other of nature's causes.

The good news is that quickly after Adam + Eve's sin and God's announcement of the curse, the Lord promised to send Jesus Christ as the woman's offspring who will crush the serpent's head (Gen 3:15).

#### **4. Believers feel agony when we experience suffering in life and cry out: Why Lord?**

Job—Why did I not perish at birth and die as I came from the womb?...Why have you made me your target? Have I become a burden to you?...Why do you not pardon my offenses and forgive my sins?...Why did you bring me out of the womb? I wish I had died before anyone saw me....Why do you hide your face and consider me your enemy? Why should I not be impatient? (3:11; 7:20,21; 10:18; 13:24; 21:4)

Many other places in the Bible: Psalms, Habakkuk, John the Baptist, more.

Job goes up and down between and doubt and faith. In his best declaration of faith he says: I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end He will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see Him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me! (Job 19:25-27) He's looking ahead by faith to Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and Second Coming like all OT believers (1 Peter 1:10-12; Abraham, Moses + Isaiah in John).

Job is an OT believer. Trusting God to send the Messiah, Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. Job doesn't get an answer in this life to all his questions. So he entrusts himself to God who judges justly and trusts the Lord with his present and future. See also Job chapter 38 onward.

It's OK to ask the Lord: Why does history unfolds as it does? Global history and my personal history? But it's best to stay our lane (mind our own business) and trust and obey the Lord. See My Goal at top of page 1.

Habakkuk feels the the same as Job. He's called the Doubting Thomas of the OT. He asks why the Lord allows the Babylonians to oppress the Jews. He asks if God will ever straighten out injustice in the world. He asks if the Lord is doing anything about all that is wrong. God doesn't fix everything right away for Habakkuk, but He fixes Habakkuk's perspective and the book ends like this:

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign Lord is my

strength; He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, He enables me to tread on the heights. (Hab 3:17-19)

### **5. Suffering is bad, but God uses it to accomplish good.**

The Lord is all-powerful, good, loving, righteous, etc. No doubt about it. But evil, hardship, pain, and suffering are bad things that God uses for good. For His glory and the ultimate blessing of His people.

Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, wrongly convicted of a crime and imprisoned. After some years, he was made Prime Minister of Egypt and said to his brothers: Genesis 50:20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

Acts 2:23,24,38,30 Jesus was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross. But God raised Him from the dead, freeing Him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him....Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.

God takes the worst thing ever done in the universe (Jesus' death) and turns it to accomplish His greatest good. Colossians 2:13-15 When you were *dead* in your sins, God made you *alive* with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; He has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, Christ made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

When Jesus looked His weakest, He was really His strongest. Jesus saves a great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb (Rev 7:9). Christ is able to save completely, once and forever, to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them (Heb 7:25).

Romans 8:28-30 *We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.* For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those He predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified.

Note that Romans 8:28 is not us-centered, but God centered. In all things God works for good according to **His purpose**. The Lord gets to define what is good. God is the Creator and we are His creatures; He is the Master and we are His servants. Christ is the Potter and we are the clay; He is Good, Great, Chief Shepherd and we are His sheep, never the other way around.

Revelation 21:3,4 Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the

old order of things has passed away.

On the Last Day, God's justice, mercy, and righteousness will be so clear and plain to everyone that no one will accuse Him of wrongdoing. Rev 15:3,4 Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations. Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.

All the evils of history will be seen to have worked for good, worthy of highest praise to the Lord.

### **6. God will end suffering for His people and judge Satan and those who reject Christ.**

Bible says that the story of this world isn't over yet. The day is coming when sickness, pain, crime, and injustice will be eradicated and people will be held accountable for every evil word, thought, and deed.

### **God will repay some day.**

Frame: If we are to evaluate God's actions rightly, we must evaluate them over the full course of human history. Much of our problem is with the long wait for God's salvation. But for Him a thousand years in His sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night (Psalm 90:4).

2 Peter 2:4-9 For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment...If God did not spare the ancient world when He brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah and seven others...If God condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly...And if God rescued Lot, a righteous man...*If this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment.* See also Revelation chapter 20.

2 Peter 3:8,9 Do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise....Instead He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

2 Thess 1:6-10 God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with His powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might on the day He comes to be glorified in His holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.

John 14:1-3 Jesus says do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

1 John 3:1-3 See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know Him. Dear friends, *now* we are children of God, and what we will be has *not yet* been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. All who have this hope in Him purify themselves, just as He is pure.

**7. Our suffering is painfully real, but not worth comparing to what God has in store for Jesus' followers.**

1 Corinthians 2:9 No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human mind has conceived the things God has prepared for those who love Him.

Romans 8:18,19 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed....The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

2 Cor 4:16-18 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

**8. God is holy, holy, holy. He is not required to defend Himself. He is the Creator, the Lord, the Judge, not we.**

Remember, Job demands and interview with God so that he can ask questions (23:1-7; 31:35-37). But when Job meets God, the Lord turns it around. Job 38:1-3 Then the Lord spoke to Job out of the storm. He said: "Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. If Job doesn't understand God's creation, how can he question God's motives, sovereignty, goodness, etc.? Job never learns why he suffered so badly.

Isaiah 40 asks: Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, or with the breadth of His hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? Who can fathom the Spirit of the Lord, or instruct the Lord as His counselor?

Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten Him, and who taught Him the right way? Who was it that taught Him knowledge, or showed Him the path of understanding? Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; He weighs the islands as though they were fine dust....He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. (12-23)

Romans 11 ends with this doxology: Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them? For from Him and through Him and for Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen. (Rom 11:33-36)

Romans 8 address the emotional problems of suffering, comforting us with God's promises and Jesus' love.

No evil, suffering, trouble can separate us from His love (Rom 8:35-39).

**9. Scripture says the Lord uses suffering for many positive purposes.** Here is a small sample:



We suffer for Christ's sake: That we can be identified with Him in His crucifixion (Gal 2:20); Because suffering is the necessary consequence of following Jesus (Ps 44:22; Acts 9:16, 14:22; 2 Tim 3:12; John 15:18-21; 1 Thes 1:6, 3:4); We share His suffering (1 Pet 4:12,13; Phil 1:29, 2:17, 3:8,10; Col 1:24; 2 Tim 1:8; Heb 13:13); so that we may share His glory (Rom 8:17,18; Heb 2:9,10; 2 Corinthians 4:17)

Matthew 5:10-12 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

John 15:1,2 I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

Psalms 119:67,71 Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.

James 1:2-4, Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything....Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

Romans 5:3-5 We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

2 Cor 1:3-5,8,9 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ....We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself....But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

2 Cor 4:12-15 So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you....We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to Himself. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

Hebrews 12:7-11 Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as His children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in His holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of

righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

1 Peter 4:12,13 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed.

Romans 8:17 Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory.

The Lord allows suffering to redirect our attention to what is most important. See Psalms 37, 73 others.

**10. John Piper: God is always doing 10,000 things in your life, and you may be aware of three of them.** You only see a tiny fraction of what God is doing and the part you do see may make no sense to you.

You may find yourself in prison, and God may be advancing the gospel among the guards, and making the free brothers bold. (Philippians 1:12–14)

You may find yourself with a painful thorn, and God may be making the power of Christ more beautiful in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:7–9)

You may find yourself with a dead brother that Jesus could have healed, and God may be preparing to show His glory. (John 11)

You may find yourself sold into slavery, accused falsely of sexual abuse, and forgotten in a prison cell, and God may be preparing you to rule a nation. (Genesis 37–50)

You may wonder why a loved one is left in unbelief so long, and find that God is preparing a picture of his patience and a powerful missionary. (Galatians 1:15; 1 Timothy 1:12–16)

You may live in all purity and humility and truth only to end rejected and killed, and God may be making a parable of His Son and an extension of His merciful sufferings in yours. (Isaiah 53:3; Mark 8:31; Colossians 1:24)

You may walk through famine, be driven from your homeland, lose husband and sons, and be left desolate with one foreign daughter-in-law, and God may be making you an ancestor of a King. (Ruth 1–4)

You may not be able to sleep and look in a random book, and God may be preparing to shame your arrogant enemy and rescue a condemned people. (Esther 6:1–13)

### **11. Extras**

Isaiah 55:8,9 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.

The Gospel of John is about the mess and misery the human race has caused...And the Son of God coming down to save us and salvage His fallen creation and His creatures.

In Luke 13, Eighteen people died when the tower in Siloam fell on them. Jesus says-Don't worry about why God allowed it. Don't think that they must have been more sinful than average. Jesus says: I tell you, no! But unless you repent,

you too will all perish.

The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, suffering, struggle, loss, and they have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen. (Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, M.D., 1926 – 2004, Swiss American psychiatrist)

Satan tempts us to get *bitter* against the Lord and other people. God designs troubles to make us *better* people, more like our Heavenly Father, more like Christ, more full of the Holy Spirit's fruit. See Romans 8:28-30.