



ON THE TABLE: Good God and Suffering?

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Glenn Garvin

ON THE TABLE



BIG IDEA – God is always good and always works for good, even in our suffering. He can be trusted.

scripture focus - “You planned evil against me; **God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people.**” [Genesis 50:20](#)

Our world is filled with tragedy, struggles and sufferings. It seems the more outrageous, the more unfathomable gets blasted out on our screens and newsfeeds. Recently, we have experienced massive forest fires and tremendous losses of people's homes.

We recognize pain and suffering. We own the fact that the human experience is filled with grief and loss. That's not the problem. The issue is the idea of a just and perfect God and how we reconcile our misery with His reputation of being good. If God is always good, why is their suffering?

Did you know that this question of a good God and suffering has its own word? I did not.

The word for today is Theodicy! Theologians have used to encapsulate this question— theodicy. If you look at the definition of theodicy, it's “the vindication of divine goodness and providence in view of the existence of evil.”

I admit it, I am kind of a “logophile,” a person who loves words.

A Christian website GotQuestions.com, says it is, “a philosophical inquiry into the existence of evil in light of God's goodness and power.”

Let's talk about Theodicy - asking the question WHY?

Offentimes, the Bible helps us to understand difficult issues that we struggle with through a story, a very real human experience.

That's exactly what we see in Genesis in visiting Joseph's story.

What was Joseph's response to suffering?

Joseph's story shows up in Genesis 37 following a long generational list of ancient patriarchs that God called out of all the people on the earth to be His people, to tell His story to the entire human race throughout all eternity. **It began with Abraham and came to a critical place when the young nation of Israel was about to die because of a famine in the land.**

Why was there a famine? Why would God allow a famine that might have destroyed His own people?

See, now we are asking the question why before we even get to Joseph's story!

God spends a lot of "word real-estate" on Joseph! From Genesis 37 to 50, **12 chapters to tell this story - the longest single story about one person and one of the longest narratives in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.**

[don't worry about the math, Chapter 38 breaks from Joseph to talk about Tamar]

Favoritism.

It all began with Jacob showing extreme favoritism to Joseph, "**Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other children because Joseph had been born to him in his old age. So one day Jacob had a special gift made for Joseph—a beautiful robe. But his brothers hated Joseph because their father loved him more than the rest of them. They couldn't say a kind word to him.**" [Genesis 37:3-4](#)

Princely dreams.

Joseph had two extraordinary dreams and was delighted to share it with his family, "**One night Joseph had a dream, and when he told his brothers about it, they hated him more than ever.**" [Genesis 37:5](#)

The other, "Soon Joseph had another dream, and again he told his brothers about it. "**Listen, I have had another dream,**" he said. "**The sun, moon, and eleven stars bowed low before me!**" This time he told the dream to his father as well as to his brothers, but his father scolded him. "**What kind of dream is that?**" he asked. "**Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow to the ground before you?**" [Genesis 37:9-10](#)

As a young man, Joseph saw his future. What does that do to a person? Give them confidence? Give them hope?

It all goes downhill fast.

Joseph's brothers couldn't wait to eliminate their spoiled, entitled little brother. Joseph walks right into their jealousy and hatred. They want to kill the dreamer! "**When Joseph's brothers saw him coming, they recognized him in the distance. As he approached, they made plans to kill him. "Here comes the dreamer!"**

they said. “Come on, let’s kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns. We can tell our father, ‘A wild animal has eaten him.’ Then we’ll see what becomes of his dreams!” [Genesis 37:18-20](#)

Joseph lands in the hands of Potiphar, Pharaoh’s captain of the guard, “Meanwhile, the Midianite traders arrived in Egypt, where they sold Joseph to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. Potiphar was captain of the palace guard.” [Genesis 37:36](#)

Joseph’s makes an impression and because God was with Joseph, he quickly rose to the top. “The Lord was with Joseph, so he succeeded in everything he did as he served in the home of his Egyptian master.” [Genesis 39:2](#)

However, he also caught the eye of a sexually frustrated wife, “Joseph was a very handsome and well-built young man, and Potiphar’s wife soon began to look at him lustfully. “Come and sleep with me,” she demanded.” [Genesis 39:6b-7](#)

Joseph’s “no means no,” meant offending and humiliating Potiphar’s wife, it did not end well, “Then she told him her story. “That Hebrew slave you’ve brought into our house tried to come in and fool around with me,” she said. “But when I screamed, he ran outside, leaving his cloak with me!” [Genesis 39:17-18](#)

Potiphar throws him into the King’s prison, a much nicer prison than the “gen pop” prison, “But the Lord was with Joseph in the prison and showed him his faithful love. And the Lord made Joseph a favorite with the prison warden. Before long, the warden put Joseph in charge of all the other prisoners and over everything that happened in the prison.” [Genesis 39:21-22](#)

This pattern of slavery to success continues not once, **but four times over several years of Joseph’s life.**

Joseph was about 30 years old when he became vice-regent to Pharaoh, which was roughly 22 years after the vision God gave him was realized. 13 of those years were spent in prison. *

Joseph’s life shows us that **suffering is sometimes part of God’s greater plan.** Joseph had a heartbreaking story, but the story had a powerful ending. Joseph faced abuse and injustice, yet he never wavered from his devotion to God.

- How do you process being despised by your own brothers who wanted to kill you?
- How do you process 13 years of slavery and imprisonment though you were innocent of any wrongdoing?

- How do you process the miraculous gift of dreams and interpretation of dreams that led to the rise to power, in the shadow of the most powerful man on the planet at that time?

It is impossible to process the immediacy of pain and grief in sorrow and suffering as it is happening. The shock and loss are mind & soul numbing.

Genesis 50:14-20 gives the processed perspective of both Joseph's brothers and of Joseph - commenting on the past and how they would move forward into the future. This is rare to capture both perspectives!

"After burying Jacob, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers and all who had accompanied him to his father's burial. **But now that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers became fearful.** "Now Joseph will show his anger and pay us back for all the wrong we did to him," they said. So they sent this message to Joseph: "Before your father died, he instructed us to say to you: 'Please forgive your brothers for the great wrong they did to you—for their sin in treating you so cruelly.' So we, the servants of the God of your father, beg you to forgive our sin." When Joseph received the message, he broke down and wept. Then his brothers came and threw themselves down before Joseph. "Look, we are your slaves!" they said." [Genesis 50:14-18](#)

You see fear that they will receive just retribution for their actions. You also **see them possibly lying about their Father's wishes (1.2), saying, "he instructed us to say to you, 'please forgive your brothers...'"** They even **invoked God, begging for forgiveness!** Lastly, they threw themselves at Joseph's feet saying, **"we are now your slaves."**

Wow! What a moment of vindication. What a moment of full circle justice after years of suffering.

Yet, after holding onto the wrongs (plural) they had done against their brother, never breaking, never relenting on the lies and evils they continued to carry - it all came out when they were without excuse, without protection from their father's honor.

There is no mention of Joseph ever ruminating, obsessing or plotting revenge on his brothers.

In Genesis 50:20, Joseph sums up his perspective after what must have been deep, emotional, spiritual work to see the entire process, from dream to fulfillment as the work of God!

"You planned evil against me; **God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people.**" [Genesis 50:20](#)

It takes proper time and distance from the event or events of suffering. No one can determine how long that takes or what it looks like for each individual.

I started with this key, this example because it speaks to the fact that **God has plans and ways of bringing those plans to fruition that we cannot see** and honestly, would not want to see until they are fulfilled!

How can there be a good God and suffering still exist?

“When suffering comes to us, we naturally — instinctively — want to know what or who has caused it.” - [Christopher Ash](#)

Three reasons, but difficult to live out.

1. **We sin. Others sin as well.** Adam & Eve willfully chose sin over obedience, and we still do the same today. **We broke relationship with God, with the planet and with each other. All the suffering, all the consequences come out of that truth.**
 - a. The Apostle Paul explained this to the church in Rome “**When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam’s sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned.**” [Romans 5:12](#).
 - b. **We choose to do things that are sinful, and that sin is still deadly and has consequences.** When you see a child suffer inconceivable abuse, you are seeing what sin can do in and through adults. When you see a human being beat, bully or torture another person, you are seeing how sin causes suffering.
2. **We have a real and deadly enemy - Satan.**
 - a. **Satan rebelled against God and wants to kill, steal and destroy as many human lives as possible.** Through him and those he has conscripted, gazillions of innocent people have suffered and are suffering still today.
 - b. The Apostle Peter writes, “**Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. 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.**” [1 Peter 5:8-9](#)
3. **God uses suffering for His own glory.** That is difficult to completely understand this side of eternity.
 - a. Joseph’s story contains all three reasons! His brother’s sin, Satan’s attack on Jacob’s family and promised legacy and God’s plan to use Joseph in rescuing His people, saving them from the famine.
 - b. The book of Job is all about this. **God believes in His plan and Job’s own free will to choose to love Him. He allows Satan to do everything but take his life! God trusted Job to do what was right, in spite of his circumstances.**
 - c. The Apostle Paul to the Philippian churches, “**Don’t be intimidated in any way by your enemies. This will be a sign to them that they are going to be destroyed, but that you are going to be saved, even by**

- God himself. For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him. We are in this struggle together. You have seen my struggle in the past, and you know that I am still in the midst of it.” [Philippians 1:28-30](#)
- d. Stefani Germanotta’s story. [Lady Gaga Clip]

What should I do when going through suffering?

It is not IF YOU SUFFER, it is when you will suffer, how will you have to choose to respond?

1. FOCUS ON GOD

- a. Satan can certainly use this “blunt force” attack to separate us from God. **Suffering can drive us crazy. And folks often lash out at God, blaming Him. We have to fight this temptation that plays into the enemy’s hands to isolate us! Joseph didn’t focus his mind on the way his brothers treated him, he focused on God.**
- b. “I have told you these things so that in Me you may have peace. You will have suffering (**thlipsis**: tribulation, distress, pressing affliction), in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world.” [John 16:33](#)
Holman Christian Standard Bible.
- c. God can and often does use our suffering for good, so we can hold on to Paul’s admonishment in **Romans 8:28 “And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.”**

2. LOOK FOR GOD’S PLAN

- a. If God does have a plan, we can look for it. While going through the most intense moments of pain and struggling to make sense out of it, may not be the best time to start looking for the good. Oftentimes we just need to hold on and cling to friends who will walk through suffering with us. Just a note, as a friend, when someone you love is suffering it’s not a great idea to say, “boy, God’s going to really use this in your life someday.” Too soon, my friend, just be present.
- b. **IN LOOKING BACK** James had figured out what good comes out of what seemed to have been bad. **James 1:2-4, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials (calamity, affliction) 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.”**
- c. When friends go through suffering and ask, “Why did this happen?” It is not a good time to give them the word **Theodicy** or explain the three reasons for suffering. It’s best just to be there with them and say,
 - I don’t know, but I’m here for you.
 - I don’t know, but let’s go to the Lord together.
 - I don’t know, but I’m going to walk with you through it.

- d. **Sometimes our response to suffering speaks loudly to those who do not know God, or do not believe in God.** Yet, they suffer too. **They us going through horrible things: loss of a loved one, a doctor's death sentence, sudden bad news about a family member or friend.**
 - Someone is watching how we do life.
 - Someone is watching when things are good and especially when they are bad. The purpose of our suffering is not that they may come to Christ but because of our pain, but that they identify more with us when in crisis than they do in celebration.
- e. God has a plan. He always has a plan for redemption in the midst of our suffering.

3. ENGAGE FAITH - TOWARDS OUR GOOD GOD

- a. **God really seems to like FAITH.**
- b. **Faith is eternal, suffering is temporary.**
 - **When I can't see the why, I can trust the who.**
 - **When I don't understand the "what" as in what is happening, I can trust the unchangeable, undeniable, unfathomable character of God.**
- c. **Regardless of the depth of pain and suffering, God is good all the time. "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever." 1 Chronicles 16:34 Repeated five times in the Psalms!**
- d. **David wrote "My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word." [Psalms 119:28](#)**

God is good and always works towards our good, even in our suffering. He can and must be trusted.

How do we choose to behave while we are in suffering?

How do we process suffering?

How do we properly respond and come alongside those who are suffering?

NOTES

Scriptures

"You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people." [Genesis 50:20](#)

It all began with Jacob showing extreme favoritism to Joseph, "Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other children because Joseph had been born to him in his old age. So one day Jacob had a special gift made for Joseph—a beautiful robe. But his brothers hated Joseph because their father loved him more than the rest of them. They couldn't say a kind word to him." [Genesis 37:3-4](#)

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“Meanwhile, the Midianite traders arrived in Egypt, where they sold Joseph to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. Potiphar was captain of the palace guard. [Genesis 37:36](#)

“The Lord was with Joseph, so he succeeded in everything he did as he served in the home of his Egyptian master.” [Genesis 39:2](#)

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“Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. 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.” [1 Peter 5:8-9](#)

“Don't be intimidated in any way by your enemies. This will be a sign to them that they are going to be destroyed, but that you are going to be saved, even by God himself. For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him. We are in this struggle together. You have seen my struggle in the past, and you know that I am still in the midst of it.” [Philippians 1:28-30](#)

“I have told you these things so that in Me you may have peace. You will have suffering (**thlipsis**: tribulation, distress, pressing affliction), in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world.” [John 16:33](#) Holman Christian Standard Bible.

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials (calamity, affliction) 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.” James 1:2-4

“Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever.” 1 Chronicles 16:34

“My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word.” Psalms 119:28

Further Notes for Study



[10 Biblical Reasons God Allows Suffering](#) - Sean McDowell

1. Suffering is the result of mankind's sin and rebellion against God (Genesis 3). Mankind chose to reject God's one command, the world became corrupted by sin, and humans have suffered ever since.
2. God's chosen people (the Hebrews) suffered when they disobeyed the Mosaic Covenant (Deuteronomy 28).
3. People sometimes suffer from the wrong choices of other human beings, even though God uses the resulting suffering for good (Genesis 50:20).
4. Suffering brings faithful believers into deeper understanding and relationship with Him (Job).

5. Believers suffer because of the jealousy and hatred of certain people who reject the Christian faith (Acts 7:54-60).
6. Believers suffer as a testament of faith to others (Hebrews 11).
7. God allows people to suffer so they will turn to Him in repentance and not perish for eternity (Luke 13:1-4).
8. Christians suffer so they can be conformed more closely to the character of Christ (Romans 8:28-30, James 1:2-4).
9. Believers suffer so they can know Christ more fully (Philippians 3:10).
10. To prepare followers of Christ for the glory of Heaven (2 Corinthians 4:17).



[Satan's Purposes in Your Suffering](#) - John Beeson

Satan wants you isolated
Satan wants you grumbling

Group Discussion

MAIN POINT

God is good and always works for good, even in our suffering. He can and must be trusted.

LEAN IN

- What experience in your life looked really bad but turned out better than expected?

Leader Note: *The Bible often chooses to use biography instead of theodicy to talk about human suffering. That means there is great power in our stories of suffering when we recognize God's work in and through that suffering. The life of Joseph is a prime example. Sold by his jealous brothers into slavery and believed to be dead by his father, Joseph, nevertheless, found himself—through a series of ups and downs—as the prime minister of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. As prime minister, he was able to save his family (and whole nations) from famine. This is how Joseph could say to his brothers, “You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people” (Genesis 50:20, CSB).*

LOOK DOWN

Read Genesis 50:15-18

- What worldview toward suffering did Joseph's brothers hold?

What reaction to their sins did the brothers expect from Joseph? What did this expectation lead them to do?

Leader Note: Joseph's brothers believed that upon their father's death, Joseph intended to exact his revenge against them, and that he would be completely justified in doing so. They begged forgiveness, but this drove them to desperation, even a willingness to become slaves to Joseph—the very thing they did to him years ago. In their view, the suffering they delivered was senseless and should result only in more suffering. Their sense of desperation and expectation of revenge is a stark contrast to Joseph's view as revealed in the passage below.

Read Genesis 50:19-21

- What did Joseph believe about God that his brothers did not? How did this impact his response to his brothers' evil acts?

Leader Note: From Joseph's story, we should start with a focus on God in our suffering (as opposed to starting with our suffering), and by doing so we will see that He is good and has a plan for good. By focusing on God, we are far less likely to act out in rage or vengeance as Joseph's brothers expected, but with patience, compassion, and mercy as Joseph did. In this sense, our suffering can give us courage and compassion to do the good thing that brings God glory.

Read James 1:2-4

How does reevaluating or reconsidering our suffering in light of God's goodness and providence change our perspective about what we are going through?

LOOK OUT

What is different or unique about a biblical view of suffering compared to the view of someone who doesn't believe in God?

Would you be willing to share about a time that you went through suffering?

Was there something you did that helped pass the time or take your focus off of your situation? Could you share it?

- How can a believer's Christ-like endurance of suffering offer a testimony of hope to others?
- Is "God is good and has a good plan" always the best response to a person who is suffering? Explain.

LOOK IN

Joseph was fortunate enough to see the good purposes for his suffering come to fruition, but that is not always the case in our lives. What can we ultimately look to in order to have confidence that God is good in our suffering?

Leader Note: *Glance at our problems but gaze at our Savior. This is because the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is irrefutable proof that God understands our suffering and works good in and through it. The most horrific act of injustice the world will ever know was the death of Jesus; yet, God was at work in it, making possible a relationship with Him for all who believe. God gets our suffering, and God works in our suffering for our good and His glory. We may not see all the good unfold in our own lives, but we know it is true because of Jesus.*

- What do we tend to focus on when suffering enters into our lives? What results come as a result of that focus?
- What is the difference between grief and despair? How does one grieve in suffering without giving into despair?

Daily Readings

Day 1: Read James 1:2-6

What's the main point of this text?

What thoughts or questions did you have when reading this text?

What do these verses reveal about God, His Word, or yourself?

How will you respond in prayer or application?

Day 2: Read John 16:25-33

What's the main point of this text?

What thoughts or questions did you have when reading this text?

What do these verses reveal about God, His Word, or yourself?

How will you respond in prayer or application?

Day 3: Read Psalm 27

What's the main point of this text?

What thoughts or questions did you have when reading this text?

What do these verses reveal about God, His Word, or yourself?

How will you respond in prayer or application?

Day 4: Read Romans 5:1-11

What's the main point of this text?

What thoughts or questions did you have when reading this text?

What do these verses reveal about God, His Word, or yourself?

How will you respond in prayer or application?

Day 5: Read Romans 8:8-30

What's the main point of this text?

What thoughts or questions did you have when reading this text?

What do these verses reveal about God, His Word, or yourself?
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