

Campus Church of Christ Jail Ministry
Series 2, Lesson #2
“God’s Sovereignty and the Problem of Human Suffering”
teacher’s guide

(all **green** text is for the teacher)

Preparation:

1. Review the scripture references in the lesson and related passages in your Bible; read through the teacher’s version of the lesson; make notes / changes as desired.
2. Pick up the following from the Jail Ministry Table:
 - attendance/prayer request sheets
 - enough copies of lesson handout for the inmates in your pod (Remember, **don’t** staple the pages.)
 - correspondence courses to give out to inmates who desire one
3. Other optional materials to bring:
 - White board marker and eraser
 - Sharpened pencils for inmates to use (be sure to collect all of them before they leave the room)

Before and as students arrive:

1. Welcome students and distribute student handouts
2. Make sure that any inmates who don’t have a Bible know that they can fill out an inmate request form to get one that is provided to the jail by the church.
3. Pass the attendance roster / prayer request sheets around.
4. Always extend a greeting of encouragement and hope as inmates are arriving.
5. Open the class / lesson with a prayer.

Focus points for this Lesson:

(main points to emphasize through the lesson and to summarize in conclusion)

- **God is in control**
- **Everyone will experience suffering as part of living in a fallen world**
- **Life on earth is just a temporary assignment**
- **God is always there for us, forever, we just have to accept Him**

Lesson #2, "God's Sovereignty and the Problem of Human Suffering"

Introduction:

We live in a world where bad things happen. Sometimes we feel vindicated when something bad happens to someone who did something bad. But, what about bad things that happen to seemingly innocent people? It is easy to believe in and accept a God of love, but problem of human suffering challenges our understanding and sometimes even our acceptance of God. So, who is this God that would allow suffering and why would He do that? Let us begin with the story of Joseph, the great grandson of Abraham, father of the Israelites.

The story of Joseph (paraphrased from Genesis 37-50)

Joseph was the favored son of Jacob who was the grandson of Abraham, father of the Israelites. Because of Jacob's favoritism towards Joseph, his brother hated him. One day when Joseph was about seventeen years old, his brothers seized him and sold him to a caravan of nomads who carried him away and sold him as a slave to Potiphar, captain of the body guards of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

God was with Joseph and blessed him, including Potiphar and his household because of Joseph. Because of the upright and worthy servant Joseph was, Potiphar placed him in charge of his house and entrusted all that he had to Joseph's care. One day, when Joseph was alone in the house with her, Potiphar's wife attempted to seduce Joseph. When Joseph refused her, she lied to her husband, accusing Joseph of attempting to seduce her. Upon hearing this, Potiphar became enraged and had Joseph thrown into prison.

Even in prison, God was with Joseph and blessed him. Soon, he was placed in charge of all the prisoners. Two of Pharaoh's servants, who had displeased Pharaoh, had also been thrown into prison. One night both had disturbing and strange dreams, which God through Joseph interpreted. Joseph told the baker that his dream meant that in three days he would be hanged. He told the cupbearer that his dream meant that his position would be restored in three days and asked him to please remember and mention him to Pharaoh when he returned to his position, but the cupbearer forgot Joseph.

After two years had passed, Pharaoh had a very troublesome dream that none of his magicians or wise men could interpret. Because of that, the cupbearer remembered Joseph, and he told Pharaoh how he had been able to interpret his dream when he was in prison. Joseph was brought before Pharaoh. As before, God was with Joseph and gave him the interpretation of Pharaoh's dream – God had revealed to Pharaoh that Egypt would have seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. When

Pharaoh saw that God was with Joseph, he appointed him second in command over all of Egypt with the responsibility to oversee the collection of food during the seven abundant years in preparation for the seven years of famine during which time he would be in charge of the distribution of the stored food.

During the years of famine, Jacob's family, who still lived in the land of Canaan, was in need of food. Jacob had heard that there was food in Egypt, so he sent his sons, except for the youngest, Benjamin, to Egypt to buy food. Since Joseph was the authority in charge of food distributions, his brothers had to go before him with their request. However, they did not recognize Joseph, and he did not reveal himself to them until after he had tricked them into bringing his youngest brother, Benjamin, back with them for him to see. Because of Joseph's position and his favor with Pharaoh, Jacob and all of his entire family were reunited and welcomed into Egypt where they were provided for with Pharaoh's blessings.

As we examine the problem of human suffering, we will begin to understand exactly how God's sovereignty was behind all that happened, both good and bad, in Joseph's life, and how, to this day, God remains sovereign.

When we talk about "God being sovereign*", what do we mean? (allow for responses and discussion)

[*According to the dictionary, **sovereign** means *having supreme rank or power; paramount (one that has the highest rank, power, or authority); supreme; autonomous (not controlled by others or by outside forces)*]

Every human being will sooner or later be faced with some sort of pain and/or suffering. Both believers and non-believers, are faced with the problem of how to reconcile the idea of a good and sovereign God with the fact that life is anything but a "Garden of Eden". The reality of life is that while there is plenty of beauty and joy, there is also more than enough sorrow, pain, suffering, and Satan's constant and relentless attacks on us. Those who do not understand the concept of God's sovereignty as well as His other holy attributes will often use this as their reason for rejecting the idea of God.

We live in a diverse culture where people hold many different values and beliefs. Because of this diversity and the need for harmony, "tolerance" has become an important value in our society. While tolerance of another's race, background, culture, and other externals is a good thing, in recent years, our society has taken "tolerance" to the philosophical level. By doing this, "tolerance" has come to mean that all views, beliefs, and values are equal to each other with none being more true or valid than the other. In other words, nothing is considered sovereign. Because people believe that one belief is as good as another, we are living in a "build your own god" age where they pick and choose only the beliefs that they like and create their own personalized god and religion.

In reality, however, all things are not equal. We know that water and gasoline are both perfectly good and useful substances, but they are also very different substances. Given this modern interpretation of tolerance, however, you would have to conclude when you take your car to the gas station, that since they are both equally good substances and water is much cheaper, you should "fill 'er up with water!" Of course, you would never put water into the gas tank of your car! Likewise, there are differences in religious beliefs, and they do matter. If there were no ultimate authority for all of humanity, then there could be no sovereign truths and sovereign truths can only come from a sovereign being.

If God didn't exist or either is not sovereign, how should we decide which person's truth is THE truth? As a society, who should be responsible for deciding which truth was THE truth? Whose truth would laws be based upon? What if every one had their own truth and thought it is the one that should be followed? What if no one could agree? (Responses and discussion: if it doesn't come out in the discussion, be sure to point out that when people do not acknowledge God as sovereign, then all sorts of problems arise for individuals and society such as situation ethics, how governments make decisions, etc.)

Fortunately, God **IS** sovereign and He is the supreme authority of the universe. Whether we accept or acknowledge this, He alone is in control. He is the source of all truth, and He has given that Truth to us in the form of His Son and His Word.

John 14 (English Standard Version)

⁶Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

What sets the God of the Bible apart from other gods?

There are definite differences between the God of the Bible and the gods of all other religions. One very significant difference is that no other god declares himself or proves himself sovereign. The God of the Bible has done both.

Isaiah 44:6-8 (New Living Translation)

⁶"This is what the LORD, Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty, says: I am the First and the Last; there is no other God. ⁷Who else can tell you what is going to happen in the days ahead? Let them tell you if they can and thus prove their power. Let them do as I have done since ancient times. ⁸Do not tremble; do not be afraid. Have I not proclaimed from ages past what my purposes are for you? You are my witnesses--is there any other God? No! There is no other Rock--not one!"

Psalms 103:19 (New American Standard Bible)

¹⁹The LORD has established His throne in the heavens,
And His sovereignty rules over all.

Romans 11:33-36 (New Living Translation)

³³Oh, what a wonderful God we have! How great are his riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his methods!
³⁴For who can know what the Lord is thinking? Who knows enough to be his counselor?
³⁵And who could ever give him so much that he would have to pay it back? ³⁶For everything comes from him; everything exists by his power and is intended for his glory. To him be glory evermore. Amen.

The *documents* that verify God's sovereignty¹ can be found in the Bible. The following scriptures support God's claim to sovereignty. (p. 79)

- He is **before** all things – Psalm 90:2, Colossians 1:17, 1 Timothy 6:16, Revelation 1:8
- He **created** all things – Genesis 1:1, John 1:3, Colossians 1:16
- He **upholds** all things – Colossians 1:17, Hebrews 1:3
- He is **above** all things – Isaiah 45:5-12, Ephesians 4:6
- He **knows** all things – Psalm 139:4, 6; Isaiah 46:10
- He **can do** all things – Jeremiah 32:27, Luke 1:37
- He **accomplishes** all things – Isaiah 14:24; 46:10; Ephesians 1:11
- He **rules over** all things – 1 Chronicles 29:11-12, Daniel 4:34-35
- He is **in control** of all things – Job 4:2, Romans 8:28

In the Bible, we also find God's titles; His promises and prophecies and the records of their fulfillment; and we find the stories and instructions of how He has and continues to work in the lives of people. Joseph understood how God was working in His life, why things happened as they did, and how he came to be in such a high position. He expressed it to his brothers this way:

Genesis 50:20 (New Living Translation)

²⁰As far as I am concerned, God turned into good what you meant for evil. He brought me to the high position I have today so I could save the lives of many people.

God's sovereignty is also clearly demonstrated through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In order for the prophecies of the Old Testament to be fulfilled and for Jesus to accomplish His purposes, including His crucifixion, the timing of His arrival on earth had to coincide exactly with the specific political and religious situations of that period of time more than 2000 years ago.

Galatians 4:4 (The Message)

⁴But when the time arrived that was set by God the Father, God sent his Son, born among us of a woman, born under the conditions of the law

We can be confident in what the Bible says about Jesus because there were hundreds of witnesses to His life, to His death, and to seeing Him alive again on earth for forty days before they witnessed Him ascend into heaven. These witnesses have testified to this

and left a written record for all who have come since that time to read and to know that Jesus is who He said He is. Jesus' victory over death and sin is God's sovereign triumph!

Why would a good and sovereign God allow suffering?

God was with Joseph and yet he experienced much suffering. We know that he experienced suffering from being hated by his own brothers, even having his very life threatened by them and then being sold by them and carried off to a foreign country. He experienced the suffering of being separated from all of his family for many years of his life, having to work as a slave, being sexually harassed, being falsely accused and imprisoned, and being forgotten in prison.

Suffering continues in our times. We or someone we love gets a terrible disease. People we love die. Children are molested and abused. People lose their jobs. Terrorists kill thousands. Tsunamis and hurricanes kill tens of thousands and wipe out entire areas. It is a fact: terrible things happen in this world.

"The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith", (John Stott) ² and is a subject that has been discussed through the ages. In this lesson, we will examine this topic very briefly based on these three assumptions: 1. God is in control. 2. We live in a fallen world filled with pain, suffering, and evil. 3. God has given us free will.

The Bible reveals to us four particular reasons why God would allow suffering (p. 5)²:

Reason #1: To alert us ²

Even though we do not like or want to feel pain in our body, we understand that it serves a very important purpose. If you did not feel pain, you could become critically injured without even knowing that you were hurt. Pain notifies us that something is wrong! The pain could be physical, emotional, and/or spiritual depending upon the situation.

In the story of Joseph how did God use suffering to get someone's attention or to warn someone? (allow for responses and discussion)

Can you think of a time when God was trying to alert you by causing you some sort of suffering? What kind? How did you respond? (allow for responses and discussion)

God chose to create humans by giving us free will rather than making us robots that could only follow commands. He wants heaven one day to be filled only with those who chose from their own free will to follow Him and love Him. When Eve and then Adam chose to follow Satan instead of God, sin entered the world and the perfection of the Garden of Eden was history. The world has been in a fallen state ever since, and we are faced with evil, disease, and all kinds of hardships. Pain became necessary to serve as a warning to us of all these dangers.

- Sometimes, we suffer pain simply because we live in a fallen world, and we or someone we love is the victim of an accident, disease, or crime.
- Sometimes we suffer pain because we see the evil and suffering going on in the world, and we sorrow for the people just as God does.
- Sometimes we suffer pain because of the sin in our own lives and the consequences that go with it.

In every case of pain, God wants our attention. Perhaps He simply wants us to focus on Him and let Him get us through the difficult time. Sometimes He is using pain to get our attention in order to bring about spiritual growth or to change our way. In Hebrews 12, God tells us that like any loving Father, He will discipline and correct us when we need it.

Hebrews 12:5-6 (New Living Translation)

⁵ . . . "My child, don't ignore it when the Lord disciplines you, and don't be discouraged when he corrects you.

⁶ For the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes those he accepts as his children."

One part of the problem with pain and suffering that we have difficulty understanding is why God seems to delay His judgment on evildoers - why He doesn't just strike them dead or at least give them some terrible disease. We must remember that God's ways are not our ways and that we don't think as He does. God wants all people to come to Him, and delaying His judgment on them and us gives more time for us all to leave our evil ways and follow His righteous ways.

2 Peter 3 (New Living Translation)

⁹The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise to return, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to perish, so he is giving more time for everyone to repent. ¹⁴And so, dear friends, while you are waiting for these things to happen, make every effort to live a pure and blameless life. And be at peace with God. ¹⁵And remember, the Lord is waiting so that people have time to be saved.

Reason #2: To Direct Us ²

Suffering directs our attention away from the here and now and toward "the big picture". It helps us realize how weak and vulnerable we are as well as what little power or control we really have. When we begin to put things into proper perspective that changes the way we live our lives in the here and now because we see that this life is just temporary and eternity is, well, eternal. Here is what the Apostle Paul had to say about his own suffering:

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 (English Standard Version)

⁹But he (God) said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the

power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 1:8-9 (English Standard Version)

⁸For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. ⁹Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

In the story of Joseph, how did God use suffering to get someone to “see the big picture”? (several possible answers, allow for responses and discussion)

Has God used suffering in your life to get you to “see the big picture”? (allow for responses and discussion)

God uses the sufferings of this life “to direct us to Him and to the long-range view of life. He calls for us to trust, to hope, and to wait.” (p. 20) ² He uses suffering to bring us to Him by offering to carry our burden. Jesus gave us this assurance:

Matthew 11:28-30 (English Standard Version)

²⁸Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

We can choose one of two ways to deal with suffering: Either we can turn away from God and become cold and cynical, or we can turn toward God and receive His grace, mercy, and strength.

Has the suffering in the lives of people you know made them *bitter or better*?
How about in your own life? (allow for responses and discussion)

Reason #3: To shape us to be like Jesus ²

We are familiar with the phrase, “no pain, no gain”. When life is easy, most of us tend to become complacent. It is usually the result of the tough times that we grow. God’s ultimate purpose for us is that we grow to become like Jesus. This goal can only be achieved through the tough training of suffering. The following passages point this out.

Romans 5 (English Standard Version)

³More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

James 1:2-4 (English Standard Version)

²Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

“As the sovereign Lord of the universe, God is using all of life to develop our maturity and Christlikeness, and to further His eternal plan” (p. 25)² to prepare a life with Him for all of eternity for those who love Him enough to live for Him here on earth.

In the story of Joseph give an example of how suffering made someone stronger and more mature? (allow for responses and discussion)

Have you allowed suffering to make you stronger or more mature or do you need to change the way you view suffering? (allow for responses and discussion)

Reason #4: To unite us ²

Suffering helps us realize our own need for the support of other believers as well as our need to give support to fellow believers who are suffering. As Christians, we are all part of the body of Christ, His Church. As a result, when one person suffers, the whole body suffers and comes to the assistance of the one who suffers.

1 Corinthians 12:26-27 (English Standard Version)

²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. ²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Ephesians 4:16 (English Standard Version)

¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (English Standard Version)

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

Galatians 6:2 (English Standard Version)

²Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Romans 12:15 (English Standard Version)

¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

“It is clear – God made us to be dependent on one another. We have much to offer those in pain, and others have much to offer us as we endure suffering.” (p. 29)²

In the story of Joseph, how did situations of suffering bring people together to care for and help each other? (allow for responses and discussion)

What recent situations in the world or in your own life come to mind that exemplify the purpose of uniting us through suffering? (allow for responses and discussion)

Conclusion:

In his life, Joseph certainly knew what it was like to suffer. Joseph couldn't see further into the future than the situations that he found himself in, yet he never stopped trusting God to direct his life. We have the advantage of knowing the Joseph's whole story, so we can see how God used suffering to accomplish all four of His purposes not only for Joseph, but for his family, Pharaoh, and even all of Egypt.

When we truly begin to understand and appreciate how incomprehensible and incredible our good and sovereign God is, the result is our willing and complete surrender to Him and our full and complete trust in Him. We will understand that, even in suffering, God sees the big picture that we cannot see and is working things out for our good in the end as well as the good of others that we may not even know about. We are able to turn loose of our worries because we know that Someone greater than ourselves is in control and has promised the best outcome, in light of eternity, for those who love Him!

Even as Christians, God has never promised us an easy life, but He has promised to get us through the tough times and to bring good out of suffering to those who are in Christ.

Romans 8

²⁸And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

³¹. . . If God is for us, who can be against us? ³²He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶As it is written:

"For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."^[l]

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,^[m] neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

With a God as great as this, how can we do anything but fall down and worship Him?

Have you allowed God into your life through your faith and love for His Son, Jesus Christ so you, too, can have the peace of knowing that He will work all things together for good and that no matter what might happen, you can never be separated from Him and His love for you?

Closing the lesson / class:

Close the lesson with a prayer. If time permits, take prayer requests.

Some like to include a song. Suggestion:

Offer **correspondence course packets** to those who desire them.

Let inmates know that **if they desire to be baptized**, they should fill out an inmate request form on which they should indicate that they wish to be baptized by someone from Snellville Church of Christ. Invite them if there is time to stay and talk with you about this after the others leave.

Collect the attendance / prayer request sheets. Collect pencils if any were passed out.

After dismissing, talk/pray with individual inmates as needed and as time permits.

Lesson Sources:

¹ Ingram, Chip. ***God as He Longs for You to See Him***. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004.

² De Haan, Kurt. "Why Would a Good God Allow Suffering?" Grand Rapids: Radio Bible Class / Resources for Biblical Communication, 1990.

All scripture references are from <http://www.biblegateway.com/>

Definitions are from <http://dictionary.reference.com>