

WHY DOES GOD ORDAIN SUFFERING?

As we have seen, God is both completely good and completely sovereign over all things, all events, and all suffering. All things work together for the ultimate good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28). But *why* does God allow suffering? What are his purposes in ordaining suffering?

THE 'MYSTERY' OF PROVIDENCE

God's providence works in relation to and in concurrence with his revealed Word, the Bible, because the two flow from the same Fountainhead. God's revealed decrees in time and space (i.e., his providence) and his revealed

Word work together in a harmonious tapestry of wisdom, design, and purpose. Thus, our experience of suffering should be interpreted through the lens of Scripture; otherwise, it will remain to us purposeless, pointless, and hopeless. Any insight or understanding, therefore, of God's design in our suffering should dovetail and echo the truth of his Word. The Scriptures navigate us like a compass in our course through this world of pain and suffering.

We must be careful, however, not to *over*-read God's intentions into our afflictions. Happiness and prosperity are not necessarily signs of God's approval or blessing. Conversely, suffering and affliction are not necessarily signs of God's disapproval or judgment. We see the saints of old complaining of this apparent irony:

'Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power? They spend their days in prosperity, and in peace they go down to Sheol' (Job 21:7,13).

'Evildoers not only prosper but hey put God to the test and they escape' (Mal. 3:15).

'For I was envious of the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches' (Ps. 73:3-4,12).

We must be cautious, therefore, in how we 'assign' specific comforts or afflictions with God's providential blessing or judgment. For example, if you contract cancer, you should not say, 'If only I had given a bigger tithe to my

church or had not spoken harshly to my teenage son, then I wouldn't have cancer.' That is making God contingent upon us, as if he owes us health, wealth, and prosperity in response to our good deeds.

Even though all events (suffering included) are the result of God's sovereign plan, only God knows the ultimate meaning and purpose behind those events. Thus, we cannot escape the reality that God's manifold purposes in our suffering will remain somewhat mysterious. The mystery of God's providence, therefore, lies not in the fact that God ordains suffering, but rather *why* He ordains suffering at specific times and in specific places. Be that as it may, Scripture does give us some instruction and insight into why God ordains suffering, for both his people and the unbelieving world.

It's easy to fall into the trap of assuming that we know why God sends specific sufferings or blessings. When might people try to do this?



THE BIG PICTURE

God ordains suffering ultimately for his glory, the good of his people, and the judgment of the unbelieving world. These are the overarching purposes of God in ordaining suffering. The apostle Paul writes, 'For from him and through him and to him are *all things*. To him be glory forever' (Rom. 11:36, emphasis mine). The apostle John records the heavenly throng, 'Worthy are you, our