

# Surprised by Suffering by Dr. R.C. Sproul

## Series introduction

Martin Luther said, “Until a person experiences suffering, he cannot know what it means to hope.” Suffering brings with it pain, anguish, and usually fear. When suffering intrudes our daily lives, the commonplace affairs are pushed into insignificance. We become consumed by the immediate pressures of the moment.

In suffering, our minds change their focus. We ask, “Why?” “Will things ever get better?” These questions push us to thoughts about God. We wonder, even, *demand* an answer for our struggles from our Maker. Sometimes we grow angry with God Himself, until we flee to Him for our comfort. Like the ancient Hebrew people, we long for the consolation of Israel.

In times of suffering, faith leaps to the forefront of our concern. Faith engages in a wrestling match with our emotions. The enemy is despair. Despair assaults our faith and the outcome of the battle is not always certain for us. When Erasmus complained about the apparent unfairness of human misery, he cried out, “Let God be good!” To this implied assault on the righteousness of God, Martin Luther replied, “Let God be God!”

To let God be God is the highest task of faith in the midst of suffering. It is what Herman Melville understood when he said, “Until we learn that one grief outweighs a thousand joys, we will not know what Christianity is trying to make us.” To inquire about suffering is to make inquiry about God. Either God is involved in our suffering or He is not God. Christianity knows nothing of a God who absents Himself from human pain and grief. God is no mere spectator of our dilemma. He is sovereign *over* it. He is sovereign *in* it.

To remove God from human suffering is to quit the pilgrimage of faith. No greater insult to God’s sovereignty can be uttered than to render Him helpless and impotent with regard to our grief. God majors in suffering. He displays His holy involvement in all suffering in the person and work of Christ. Our Savior is a suffering Savior, a Savior acquainted with grief and on intimate terms with sorrow. Herein lies the victory, that Christ is both victim and victor for us.

## Lesson 1’s introduction

Often the first questions that come to people who suffer are “Why me?” or “How can a good God allow anything so bad?” Worse than the pain of suffering is the hopelessness that comes with a sense that there is no purpose or value to the pain. This session explores the purpose of pain and suffering in order to gain an understanding of God’s relationship to the tragedies that intrude into human life.

## Quotation

*Over all injustice, all pain, all suffering, stands a sovereign God who works His plan of salvation over, against, and even through evil.* R.C. Sproul

## Questions to consider

1. When did you first become aware of God’s involvement in your suffering?
2. How do most of us tend to respond when there is no evident purpose in our suffering?
3. What should we do when God’s purpose is not clear and we feel overcome by fear, anger, or shock?
4. How can we determine whether specific suffering *is* the consequence of specific sin, an attack from Satan, or a test from the Lord?
5. How can a good God let bad things happen to “nice” people?
6. Can general suffering, not just suffering for our Christian faith, be counted as sharing in the suffering of Christ (1 Peter 4:13)?

Further study: Ps. 16:7-11, Ps. 73:23-26 & John 16:33