

Chad and Courtney Phelps of Indianapolis, Indiana and their unborn daughter passed from earth to heaven on July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013 in a tragic bus accident while returning from youth camp in Michigan having left a legacy of loving the Lord, each other, baby Chase and the youth of Colonial Hills Baptist Church, Indianapolis, Indiana where they served.

Charles Richard Phelps, III (Chad) was born on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May in 1988. Courtney Anna (Popow) Phelps was born August 9, 1989 and was pre-deceased by her father when she was 11 months of age.

The passion of this young couple was seeking to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ by life or by death. Chad and Courtney's greatest earthly joy was their beloved son Chase with whom they relished every moment of life. While the Phelps were passionate about sports their first priority was to enrich the lives of others by bringing them closer to Jesus. Chad's focus on the Word of God opened doors for him to begin a teaching and preaching ministry while very young. Courtney's sincere love of others was made evident through her thoughtfulness in every moment, decision and expression. Both Courtney and Chad were well-travelled, well-read, musically-trained and dedicated to fulfilling God's calling in their lives by using their talents completely for their Savior. From their youth, they knew the assurance of salvation and the calling of God to full-time Christian service and never veered from that dedication. Courtney loved to inspire children and youth to use music to bring honor to God. Having made major spiritual steps while at camp and on many mission trips, both Chad and Courtney worked diligently to involve young people in such activities. Through their lives they have impacted an innumerable multitude of souls and have laid up for themselves eternal treasures in heaven. In their short lives, they lived out the verse that they selected for their wedding program – 1 Thessalonians 5:24 - *"Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it."*

# WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF SUFFERING?

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Colonial Hills Baptist Church  
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## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF SUFFERING?

For Jessica Ghawi, it started off like any other day. The aspiring sportswriter from Toronto decided to go to the mall to pick up some things she desperately needed. At 6:20PM she purchased her dinner at the food court and slipped outside. At 6:23PM shots rang out in the very food court where she had just been. Jessica began to panic as pandemonium broke loose. She recalls seeing victims writhing in pain on stretchers. She remembers hearing that one person died. Here's what she wrote on her personal blog a few days later:

*I was shown how fragile life was on Saturday. I saw the victims of a senseless crime. I saw lives change. I was reminded that we don't know when or where our time on earth will end.*

That was June 2, 2012. On July 20, 2012, Ghawi went to see the newly released Batman film. She was in Aurora, Colorado. She never made it home. The 24-year-old's life was snuffed out instantly by a brutal gunman. Her family was left with pain of unimaginable proportions.

All of us shake our heads solemnly as we identify with the Ghawis' tragedy through our own great, painful moments, and we admit that suffering is part of the human experience.

Indeed, suffering is everywhere.

- According to disaster.com, 485 natural disasters killed 297,000 people in the year 2010, innocent people who woke up in the morning and were dead by nightfall. They were children, parents, and grandparents whose dreams never became a reality. Dead. Just like that.
- In 2011, an estimated 1,596,670 new cancer cases were diagnosed in the U. S. Patients were young and old. Some had no idea anything was wrong with them. Now they faced the death angel of all diseases. 571,950 people died of cancer in the U. S. in 2011. Everyone knows of somebody who has died of cancer. It's a part of life.

Again, we shake our heads and solemnly admit that indiscriminate suffering is a part of the human experience.

Questions like this, then, naturally follow:

- Why do tears stain the pillows of countless innocent children whose mommies and daddies are severing their relationships and costing these kids the only sense of security they know?
- Why is a civil war in Sudan causing elementary-aged children to pick up machine guns against neighbors as we speak?
- In my own heart, why will the pain not stop?

Once more, we readily admit that suffering—deep, painful suffering—is a part of existing as a human on this earth. But the questions above are more difficult. Why does suffering occur?

Here is our human reality: The truth about suffering is that because of our fallen condition, people – even the strongest Christians – struggle to make sense of suffering.

But we have God's promise: We must realize that even when things don't make sense, Jesus can meet our deepest need.

Admittedly, this is a huge topic to try to cover in one time together. The Scripture devotes numerous passages to this extensive subject. In order to try to cover the amount of ground we need to, we will start by making a few acknowledgements related to suffering and then point out two purposes of suffering that are unfolded in the Word of God.

#### SUFFERING: THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These acknowledgements are simply axioms we know to be true based on what we discover in the Word of God. So anyone with a Christian worldview must accept these acknowledgements relating to God and suffering as truth, for they are founded on the Word of God.

#### **Acknowledgement #1: God controls all things: He is sovereign (Lamentations 3:37-38).**

A famous philosopher named Rabbi Kushner tried to answer the question we're answering this evening. He recognized that there is a tension between God's love and His control of all things, and he said that in order to make sense of suffering, you had to think this way:

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***Either** God is good, but not all-powerful.  
**Or** God is all-powerful, but certainly not good.*

But according to Lamentations, Kushner's thinking is wrong. Lamentations is the hymnbook Israel used when singing songs of forgiveness and asking for a renewal of their covenant relationship with God. Therefore it answers questions the Israelites themselves may have had about the character of God when they felt separated from Him during times of sin or suffering. Chapter 3 is a song about the faithfulness of God, and in the middle of the chapter we find all the ammo we need to dispel Kushner's fallacious notion.

*Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the most high that both good and bad come? (Lam. 3:37-38)*

God's sovereignty means that He rules over all things, good and bad, and we must not – we CANNOT – give that up!

In the midst of a trial or testing, it can be tempting to think that the bad things don't come from God. Yes, they do!

Remember Job? In one day, Job lost 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 7 sons, and 3 daughters. The stunning thing about this? God controlled it all!

God is sovereign. That means He has ultimate control over every event in your life.

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Here is our human reality: Even the strongest Christians struggle to make sense of suffering.

But we have God's promise: Even when things don't make sense, Jesus can meet your deepest need!

We've acknowledged that God controls all things. Now we must take a look at the second acknowledgement.

**Acknowledgement #2: God orchestrates all events: He is providential (I Samuel 2:7-8).**

Believe it or not, there is a huge difference between this and the first acknowledgement. You can believe that God is in control of everything and not believe that He actively involves Himself in the things that take place in your life. To do so is to miss the concept of God's *providence*.

As we find our way to I Samuel 2, we need to understand what is going on here.

- Hannah wanted a son but hadn't been able to have one.
- Finally, God promised a son, Samuel was born, and Hannah promised to give him back.
- Hannah has now arrived at the day she must give him back.
- It is an incredibly emotional passage!

After dropping off her only son, she stoops to worship and says,

*The Lord makes poor and makes rich; He brings low and he exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; He lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them He has set the world. (I Sam 2: 7-8)*

Do you understand what she's saying there? She is not just saying that God is in control but that He actively engages in each thing that we see round about us. The unseen motions of God that cause things to happen are known as His providence.

An experience in the life of Franklin Pierce illustrates God's providence.

*In December 1852, the president-elect of the United States, Franklin Pierce, traveling with his family on a train, was wrecked at Concord, New Hampshire. Several of the passengers were killed, among them the young son of the president-elect, a fine lad of ten years, who died in his mother's arms. The accident was thought to be due to dereliction of duty on the part of an intoxicated brake-man; and some of those who had received injuries, or whose relatives had been killed in the disaster, brought suit against the railroad company. But Mrs. Pierce, a devout Christian, would not permit the president-elect to become a party to the suit; on the contrary, she had him secure the services of the famous lawyer Benjamin Butler to defend the railroad, on the ground that she regarded the disaster and the*

*great personal sorrow that it had brought to them as a special providence better to prepare the president-elect for the high office to which he was shortly to be inaugurated.*

Just as Mrs. Pierce recognized the active providence of God and the fact that He remains in control of and involved in creation, so we must believe that God is in control!

- Yes, you failed that test at school, but God allowed that to happen!
- Yes, your parents' marriage is in trouble, but it's no surprise to God!

Even as Hannah realized that God maintains active control, so must you!

Here is our human reality: Even the strongest Christians struggle to make sense of suffering. But we have God's promise: Even when things don't make sense, Jesus can meet your deepest need!

We've noted that God is sovereign, that He is providential, but there's another key acknowledgement we must come to realize, and it's built on the first two.

**Acknowledgement #3: God is good and He does good (Psalm 119:68).**

*You are good and do good; teach me your statutes.*

This is perhaps the toughest acknowledgement. It is one thing to weep with the weeping and maintain that God is in control. It is quite another to look at the thing that has taken place and say "it is good." And yet, according to this text, we know that it is.

In the context of this passage, God's goodness is not something that is up for debate. It is an axiom of truth that the psalmist intends to live by. It is a universal given. Everything that God does is good because that is who He is!

If we maintain that God controls all things (He is sovereign) and that He orchestrates all events (He is providential), then we know that He is in charge of all that happens and He is good!

You've heard the story of Jim Elliot, who, with his heart burning for the souls of the Auca Indians in Ecuador, went to them in full realization of what was at stake and was promptly slaughtered. When this happened, Elisabeth Elliot, his wife, testified that it was one of the toughest things she'd ever been through, until God reached down and touched the hearts of those Aucas. They came to Christ and became friends and mentors to Jim Elliot's children.

Don't take this passage and expect that because God does good, you will then love everything He does! There's one important key to remember: You don't possess an omniscient viewpoint! You can't see the end from the beginning! Consider this: The very BEST thing that God ever did brought

incredible pain to the humans who loved Jesus and observed his crucifixion. Through your deepest pain too, you must understand that what God is doing is good.

Here is our human reality: Even the strongest Christians struggle to make sense of suffering. But we have God's promise: Even when things don't make sense, Jesus can meet your deepest need!

### SUFFERING: THE PURPOSES

With an understanding of the acknowledgements that shape our view of suffering, we can discover at least two specific purposes for suffering as they're manifested in God's Word.

This is not meant to be an exhaustive list by any stretch of the imagination. There are more to be sure, but these are the two main reasons, and the second purpose encompasses all other purposes, including the first.

#### **Purpose #1: Sometimes suffering is for discipline (Hebrews 12: 3-10).**

*Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." It is for discipline that you*

*have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.*

The writer of Hebrews addresses a small breakaway group of Christians in Rome. He encourages them often and reminds them of their status. He motivates them with stories of faithful saints of the past. When we come to Hebrews 12, he really begins to address their suffering.

The point of the text is clear—sometimes God sends suffering into the lives of His children as discipline. This is a reassurance of sonship and an opportunity to draw near. When a loving father exercises loving discipline, he does so with a purpose. He wants to see correction.

I want to say this carefully and lovingly:

Every believer that experiences pain and suffering especially as it relates to trouble from others has an obligation to search his heart. Often we look first at others when suffering happens. Instead, we must look first at our own hearts. Is God trying to teach us something?

We should be looking at ourselves and asking the Lord to show us if this is discipline. Why? Because the results are glorious!

Here is our human reality: People – even the strongest of Christians – struggle to make sense of suffering. But we have God's promise: Even when things don't make sense, Jesus can meet your very deepest need.

We have considered that one purpose may be discipline, but it is incredibly important that we understand this final purpose, because no matter what the disappointment is, it always applies.

**Purpose #2: Always, suffering is to convince you that Jesus is enough (Psalm 73:26).**

*My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*

Have you ever been so overcome by grief that you literally felt as if you were going to give way? Maybe you're there today.

- Maybe the diagnosis coming back from the doctor is unfavorable.
- Maybe the relationship that you have always counted on is not there.
- Maybe your home – that place you should be able to count on for stability – is anything but stable.

You may feel there's no way you can go on. If so, you're in good company, the company of the psalmist. Often God will

drive you to the pit of despair in order to get you to realize that He really is enough!

Are you familiar with "Facebook Christianity"? This Christianity goes something like this:

- I got a new job! God is good!
- My doctor appointment went well! God is sooo good!
- The Lord gave me a new witnessing opportunity! God is good!

These are all good things, and we should give thanks for them! However, this is not true Christianity. Do you know what true Christianity is? Are you familiar with the purpose of suffering?

- True Christianity is like the acquaintance of mine from college who lost her 6-week-old son this past week and responded by saying, "God is good, he is enough. He is sufficient. Take my son, Lord, I don't need anything else. The trying of my faith works patience, so please, Jesus, let patience have its perfect work!"
- True Christianity is the teenager whose family falls apart and he says through the deepest possible pain, "I have Jesus. He is enough. My flesh and my heart fail me, but God is the strength of my life and my portion forever."

There are many things I hope you remember from tonight, but first and foremost I want you to remember that against all logic and against the background of the acknowledgement that God is sovereign and intensely providential, suffering in this world occurs in order for people to understand that Jesus is enough!

- The mother in Indonesia clasped her lifeless child to her in order for God to show her that Jesus is enough.
- The Cambodians were subject to the killing fields of their dictators in order for God to show them that Jesus is enough!
- The sun came up this morning so that in the midst of your deepest possible pain, God could show you that Jesus is enough!

Martin Luther's was a life marked by enormous suffering for the cause of Christ. He suffered societal rejection and even physical pain and torment that manifested itself in various diseases at the end of his life. Here is what he said regarding suffering:

*If I believe the Word, I shall on the Last Day, after the sentence has been pronounced, not only gladly have suffered ordinary temptations, insults, and imprisonment, but I shall also say: "O, that I did not throw myself under the feet of all the godless for the sake of the great glory which I now see revealed and which has come to me through the merit of Christ!"*

Jesus is enough. Against the backdrop of God's sovereignty, goodness, and providence, Jesus is enough. You must believe it!

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## THE PROBLEM

The Bible tells us that "it is appointed unto men once to die" (Hebrews 9:27), because "all have sinned" (Romans 5:12).

Originally, the one God created this world in perfection (Genesis 1:31), and the first man and woman (Adam and Eve) were able to completely enjoy life on earth, without the suffering, pain, evil, and death that we experience today.

However, when they disobeyed God (Genesis 3:6), they began to experience the effects of sin that God warned them about – namely, suffering and death (Genesis 2:15-17; 3:16-19). God's Word tells us that every human since Adam has been born a sinner, willingly perpetuated that sin (Romans 3:10, 23), and reaped its resulting consequences of eternal death (Romans 6:23; Revelation 20:15).

## THE SOLUTION

The "good news" (i.e., the gospel – Romans 1:16) of God's Word is that a "second Adam" has provided salvation for us from sin and death (Genesis 3:15; Romans 5:12-21; I Corinthians 15:45). God Himself came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ to live a perfect life, to die for our sin in our place, and to rise from the dead, defeating death so that we might be given His perfection and life (II Corinthians 5:21; I Peter 3:18).

## THE INVITATION

The Bible says that if you choose to turn away from your sin and trust in Him alone as the only One who can save you from your real eternal predicament, God will forgive your sin and grant you eternal life with Him (John 3:16). And so, God lovingly extends to you this hope: "if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9; Acts 4:12).