



Openness Theology

Part 4: The Omniscience of God and Suffering

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2 Corinthians 12:7-10 – “. . . there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me - to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Imagine the following scenario: A friend you haven’t seen in many years calls you out of the blue. After some small talk and brief catching up, she finally gets to the reason for her call. She wants some advice.

Her husband of 15 years has left her and their five children for another woman. He was an elder in their church and got involved with the wife of another elder in the church. He came home one evening and informed her that “he no longer loved her, but had fallen in love with another woman.”

Instantly you recall the details of how this friend and her husband of 15 years had met. It was at a church function. They quickly fell in love and after seeking God’s will, and input from couples whose wisdom they respected, they married.

He was a Bible School graduate who had intentions of serving God on a foreign mission field. After 4 years service, she found out she was pregnant with their first child and they returned to the United States.

As far as she could tell they had a model marriage and a good and loving relationship, until he came home with his earth shattering announcement. Now she is calling you for encouragement. What do you say?

You tell her that her husband’s decision is just as much a surprise to God as it is to her. You tell her that God could not know in advance what her husband would choose to do and that God had obviously made a mistake in leading them to get married in the first place.

You assure her that the suffering that she is going through is utterly pointless. You encourage her by telling her that although God is *hoping* that some good will come out of this situation, there is certainly no guarantee since God is not involved in her suffering, and He cannot possibly know what is going to come of it.

You tell her that this is just one more totally pointless evil about which God grieves. It is only one of a multitude of tragic events that God watches daily, wishing He could change.

That is the advice that you would give her if you were a follower of open theism.¹ Amazingly, one of the things that draws people to open theism is this “detached” notion of a God who cannot foresee suffering and has no purpose in it.

The Suffering Dilemma

If, according to the traditional understanding of God’s omniscience, God knows in advance everything that will happen in the future and knows it all in exacting detail, then it cannot be avoided. If God knows perfectly what is going to happen, then it certainly **will** happen, for God cannot be mistaken in His knowledge. If that is true, then it inevitably follows that God brings about the suffering and He is therefore responsible for it. Or so says the open theist.

How does the open theist resolve this issue? As Bruce Ware describes open theisms answer, “. . . *we must deny*

¹ For a description of the beliefs and proponents of open theism, as well as their attack on the atonement of Christ, see the previous articles in this series. You can read archived columns on the website at www.kootenaichurch.org.

that God knows and can know the future free decisions and actions of his moral creatures. When suffering occurs, we can rest assured that God neither planned it, nor did he will it, nor did he know of it in advance, nor does he have some 'secret' purpose behind it. Rather, the God of open theism wishes that suffering and affliction never did occur, and whenever it does, he feels badly for it and he is there, in the suffering, to provide strength and hope to those undergoing pain."²

According to open theism, God does not know in advance that affliction will happen and He does not will it to occur. Further, when it does happen, it serves no purpose and we should not "dignify" suffering by saying that God somehow intended it. Open theist, John Sanders, writes, "Thus God does not have a specific divine purpose for each and every occurrence of evil. . . . When a two-month-old child contracts a painful incurable bone cancer that means suffering and death, it is pointless evil. The Holocaust is pointless evil. The rape and dismemberment of a young girl is pointless evil. The accident that caused the death of my brother was a tragedy. God does not have a specific purpose in mind for these occurrences."³

Openness theology offers a God who is not in any way using affliction in our lives. He is absolved from any involvement in our affliction and actually wills something different, but cannot bring it to pass. The BIG question of the day is this, "Is this what Scripture says about God's involvement in suffering?"

God in Suffering

According to the biblical understanding of God, God knows all that will occur, including all the suffering. Yet He created the world knowing both that suffering *would occur* and that His good purposes would be accomplished through it. So how should we understand the role of God in our suffering?⁴

The first thing we should understand is that God is good. We can affirm from Scripture that God is good and only good. **Psalm 5:4** - "For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness; no evil dwells with You." **Psalm 107:1** - "Oh give thanks to the LORD, for He is

good."

Second, Scripture teaches that suffering is often ordained by God and intentionally used by Him as an instrumental good. Not that suffering in itself is good, but that it is *used* (in an instrumental sense) for good. God designs at least some suffering for bringing about some good through it.

For instance, suffering can be God's appointed means of judgment (**Num. 16:31-35, 41-50; Isa. 10:5-19**), a tool of disciplining His wayward children (**Heb. 12:10; Prov. 3:12; 1 Cor. 11:30**), and a means of growth and strengthening of believers (**James 1:2-4; Rom. 5:3-5**). It can serve to expose human weakness in order that the power and glory of God may be more evident (**2 Cor. 4:8-12; 12:8-10**). Suffering can be given in order that we will be better able to minister to others who face similar experiences of pain and suffering (**2 Cor. 1:3-7**). Suffering is also a necessary and unavoidable result of being a disciple and walking with Christ (**1 Peter 2:20-25; John 15:18-20; Phil. 3:10; 2 Tim. 3:12**).

Third, God has promised that nothing comes into the lives of His children except that which He allows for His purposes and our good. **Romans 8:28** gives us the promise that we "**know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.**"

Are we to understand that "all things" does not include the bad things? Are we to understand that the "all things" does not include suffering and affliction? The open theist tells us that God cannot foresee suffering and that we cannot expect anything to come out of it. It is "pointless evil."⁵

"God orchestrates and uses suffering in the lives of his children for the purpose of bringing to them some ultimate (and at times immediate) good. God **does** intend good purposes through suffering, and Christians are robbed of this precious confidence by the open view's denial of this cherished truth."⁶

We are commanded to give thanks "**in all things**" (**Eph. 5:20**) and "**for all things**" (**1 Thess. 5:18**). How can we thank God for suffering if He is not using it? If it is true that suffering only causes harm, that God cannot stop it or use it for good, and that there is no purpose or point to it, then what reason is there for giving thanks in the midst of it? If that is how we think of suffering, then we can only despair.

2 Bruce A. Ware, *Their God is Too Small: Open Theism and the Undermining of Confidence in God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003), 60.

3 John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity, 1998), 261-262.

4 For a complete treatment of this subject, I would recommend you read *Their God is Too Small* by Bruce Ware. I am indebted to his work for much of what follows.

5 Sanders, 261-262.

6 Ware, 70-71. Emphasis in the original.

Unwittingly, the open view of God strips believers of the very confidence, hope, and comfort that Scripture intends for them to have.

It is far better to believe what Scripture teaches: that God reigns over the suffering in our lives, and that He purposes our good through **everything** that happens.

Fourth, God is more concerned with our character than our comfort. He uses trials, suffering, and affliction to mold and shape us. That is why James tells us to **“consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2-4)**. How can the open theist affirm what James says in that passage?

“Take away the providential hand of God, take away the good purpose served by the suffering, take away the character formation, hope, and holiness that stand behind the suffering, and you take away all reason to rejoice. . . . the believer’s only sure hope and confidence in suffering is that God is very much involved in the affliction to bring about both what he has ordained by it and what is good for his child.”⁷

Open Theism Doesn’t Deliver

Open theism seeks to alleviate God of all culpability in our suffering and all involvement in our affliction, but it falls miserably short. What confidence can you have in the God of open theism? Supposedly, He stood by while nineteen hijackers boarded four different airliners on September 11, 2001. He watched their plans unfold. He knew of the communications they had received from the organizers of the attack. (Remember, He supposedly has complete and perfect knowledge of all things past and present.) He watched them pack their box cutters. He knew their heart and their intentions. He observed their plans and watched them plan the attacks for years. He watched them buy their tickets, but stood by and did nothing. Couldn’t He have delayed their flight? Couldn’t He have caused all nineteen to have heart attacks the night before? No. Not the God of open theism. He cannot stop the suffering from happening due to His previous commitment to let free creatures do as they wish with their freedom.

Then when tragedy strikes we are supposed to take comfort in the notion that God is not in anyway involved in it. We are supposed to rest in the fact that the direction He

gives in the midst of it is not perfect since He cannot possibly know what awaits us tomorrow. We are supposed to be comforted by the idea that God would like to bring good out of it, but cannot. It is just a pointless evil that has occurred and we may be faced with even more. Who knows? Certainly God doesn’t.

That, my friends, is a bitter recipe for despair. When tragedy strikes, we may ask, “Where is God in all of this?” The open theist answers, “God is not there!”

The god of open theism is not worthy of our love, adoration, confidence, trust, and faith. He is a false god. The true God says to him, “Behold, you [the false gods] are nothing, and your work is less than nothing; and abomination is he who chooses you” (Isaiah 41:24).

Without Wax—



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Quotable Quotes

“The God of the Bible gives us a deep and profound sense of purpose in all the afflictions, sufferings, trials, and tribulations that we face, but the God of open theism tells us that all of our pain is pointless. . . . The God of the Bible purposely allows all that happens, knowing exactly what he is doing and what purpose the suffering will accomplish, but the God of open theism strips both God and us of any and all hope in suffering. . . . The God of the Bible has a track record that is perfect - He never, never fails. But the God of open theism fails us perhaps more often than we could possibly know - never meaning to, but failing nonetheless.”

- Bruce A. Ware, *Their God is Too Small*

⁷ Ibid, 73, 77.