

# DOES GOD CARE ABOUT OUR SUFFERING?

John W Nichols

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## Acknowledgements

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## Table of Contents

Why this paper?.....	5
Does God care about our suffering?.....	6
Joseph unjustly confined in prison.....	8
Israel toiling away in slavery.....	10
The disciples battling a storm at sea.....	13
Conclusion.....	14
Helpful References.....	15
Meet John W Nichols.....	16

# WHY THIS PAPER?

Does God care about our suffering? I've pondered that question just as you have, and have found myself in moments of arrogance desiring to school God on His lax attitude toward the human plight. The one human who gained an audience with God to discuss the topic found quickly that his frail faculties were no match for the Creator's knowledge and abilities. Job chose the wiser option of accepting that some workings are beyond human understanding.

Then Job answered the LORD and said, "Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? I lay my hand on my mouth. Once I have spoken, and I will not answer; Even twice, and I will add nothing more."  
Job 40:3-5 NASB

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# DOES GOD CARE ABOUT OUR SUFFERING?

Does God see our suffering? Does He care? Is He aware of the adversity with which we wrestle in daily life? Is He doing anything about it? How can a good and loving God allow suffering especially in the lives of those who follow Him? Should not His disciples receive an exemption?

Suffering travels under many monikers. We will find it tagged in sermons, books, and web posts as:

Adversity	Affliction	Agony	Anxiety
Care	Concern	Discomfort	Distress
Fret	Heartache	Hurt	Misery
Ordeal	Sorrow	Testing	Torment
Trial	Tribulation	Trouble	Woe

The cauldron of suffering cooks us thoroughly, and it is in this painful experience that many determine for themselves that suffering and God cannot mix. Their thinking can be summarized as “If God is love then He cannot allow suffering, and since suffering exists then God cannot be a God of love or at least He does not love me.”

Some sufferers eject their faith and determine to continue life with a steely self-reliance and determination. Human hearts are easily hardened aren’t they?

In one of His well-known parables Jesus described four types of soil and applied the discussion to humans listening to the Word of God.

“Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away. “The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity.

Luke 8:13-14 NASB

His insights, as we would expect, were spot on, and when we consider the rocky and thorny soils perhaps we are looking at listeners who flailed away in a time of suffering as their hope faded and their faith weakened.

This discussion ahead will not exhaustively analyze the possibilities and causes of suffering or put forth pithy answers to the lingering question, “Why suffering?” Suffering has been, is now,

## Does God Care About Our Suffering?

and will be a part of every life in this world. Though the degree may vary from person to person each will be required to face and deal with his own portion.

Some suffering comes as a result of poor life choices. Some may fall as divine judgment for wrong doings. Some appears so that we may shine for Christ in the middle of the turmoil. (I often wish I might pass that privilege on to another brother or sister!) Some just happens because we live in a fallen world. Some comes because God has His purpose for it. An investigation to uncover the root cause in each case of adversity can drive us mad with frustration. As humans we simply do not know. I've included a list of references at the end of the paper, and while no one can offer definitive answers on suffering, most authors offer helpful nuggets.

Rather than share my observations of this study at the end I will present them now. I found my focus zeroing in on God not the suffering because in my experience, limited though it is, He alone gives the wisdom, power, insight, and fortitude to move forward in the face of adversity. He does not necessarily explain the whys and is under no obligation to do so.

Here's what I learned about God as I analyzed the examples which follow...

- God allows suffering in the lives of those He loves.
- An understanding of God's timing and purpose lies beyond our comprehension even as His eternality extends beyond our finite existence.
- God's plan is much larger in scope than any we may derive for ourselves.
- God desires to use us in His way according to His schedule for His purpose.
- God may not reveal the details of His workings.
- Our moments where failure seems certain represent God's moments to shine.

We will consider three Bible examples, and the author assumes that the reader is familiar with these accounts. Should a review be necessary refer to the listed passages.

1. Joseph unjustly confined in prison. (Genesis 37, 39-50)
2. Israel toiling away in slavery. (Exodus 1-7)
3. The disciples battling a storm at sea. (Matthew 8:23-27, Mark 4:35-41, Luke 8:22-25)

## Joseph unjustly confined in prison

(Genesis 37, 39-50)

Joseph, basking in the glow as dad's favorite son, did not endear himself to his ten older brothers. They hated him. To further degrade the relationship Joseph shared with his family a pair of dreams which could only be interpreted as his brothers bowing in respect before him.

Jealousy and hatred smoldered under the surface until one day the eruption happened. The brothers recognized their chance to do away with their dreaming brother once and for all.

When they saw him from a distance and before he came close to them, they plotted against him to put him to death. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer! Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we will say, 'A wild beast devoured him.' Then let us see what will become of his dreams!"  
Genesis 37:18-20 NASB

They tossed their little brother into a pit and formed a plan to mask his murder. Judah mercifully suggested selling him into slavery rather than killing him, and for the lofty price of twenty shekels of silver Joseph became the property of the Ishmaelites. Things had gone from bad to worse for Joseph.

We are privy to God's long-term plan and the higher purpose He held for Joseph's life, but we find no communication of that plan to Joseph beyond that pair of cryptic dreams. Knowing that God is staging the events of our lives and working His plan should bring comfort, but often (usually?) the details are hidden from us. As the avalanche of suffering propels us downhill we may wonder where God's attention might be at the moment. It is here that faith must provide our solid foundation.

Potiphar, a high-ranking officer of Pharaoh's army, purchased Joseph and made him overseer of his household. Scripture reveals one aspect of God's workings—a special blessing on Joseph's life summed up as "The LORD was with Joseph." Rather than mope over his circumstances Joseph applied himself, and God blessed the work of his hands and mind. Potiphar recognized the supernatural prosperity which surrounded every project Joseph undertook.

Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the bodyguard, bought him from the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there. The LORD was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian. Now his master saw that the LORD was with him and how the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hand. So Joseph found favor in his sight and became his personal servant; and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge.  
Genesis 39:1-4 NASB

Joseph maintained his integrity and, though he was propositioned repeatedly by Mrs. Potiphar, he refused to give in to sexual temptation. That wicked woman seethed with anger and falsely accused Joseph of rape. Next stop for Joseph, the slave, became an Egyptian prison.

Yet God had not forgotten the young man. God's plan was intact and progressing. God's timing was on track.



## Does God Care About Our Suffering?

But the LORD was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. The chief jailer committed to Joseph's charge all the prisoners who were in the jail; so that whatever was done there, he was responsible for it. The chief jailer did not supervise anything under Joseph's charge because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made to prosper.

Genesis 39:21-23 NASB

Two government officials were eventually imprisoned with Joseph and each had a dream which Joseph interpreted. One of those officials, the chief cupbearer, was pardoned and restored to his former position. Would he speak up for Joseph? Might Joseph's case and the injustice of his predicament find its way to Pharaoh?

Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

Genesis 40:23 NASB

Two years passed, and Pharaoh had a dream. Suddenly the cupbearer remembered his cellmate and dropped Joseph's name to Pharaoh. In short order Joseph rocketed to second-in-command in Pharaoh's administration and executed a plan to save Egypt from seven years of famine. It was in that role that he was reunited with his brothers.

This story shouts of hope—the God of the impossible managing the details, moving the people, and shaping the events for a purpose far above all. Joseph got it. The years of suffering that moved him deeper and deeper into seeming hopelessness all ripened at God's harvest time and bore fruit. Here's the testimony.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come closer to me." And they came closer. And he said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. "Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. "For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. "Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Genesis 45:4-8 NASB

"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.

Genesis 50:20 NASB

God uses us in His way at His time and for His purposes. What we must bring to Him is a willingness to endure, trust, and maintain our integrity no matter the circumstances.

## Israel toiling away in slavery

(Exodus 1-7)

The goodwill that Joseph generated among the Egyptians as they welcomed his family to the neighborhood did not last forever. Certainly his God-given insight and wisdom carried the nation through a seven-year famine, but once the trouble disappeared the Egyptians developed suspicions about the intentions of Joseph's relatives. The official record reveals...

Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. But the sons of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly, and multiplied, and became exceedingly mighty, so that the land was filled with them. Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we. "Come, let us deal wisely with them, or else they will multiply and in the event of war, they will also join themselves to those who hate us, and fight against us and depart from the land." So they appointed taskmasters over them to afflict them with hard labor. And they built for Pharaoh storage cities, Pithom and Raamses. But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread out, so that they were in dread of the sons of Israel.

Exodus 1:6-12 NASB

The writer of Psalm 105 provides a fast-read summary of Israel's history and offers this explanation of what triggered the Egyptian animosity.

Israel also came into Egypt; Thus Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham. And He caused His people to be very fruitful, And made them stronger than their adversaries.

Psalms 105:23-24 NASB

When forced labor failed to reduce the number of the sons of Israel or at least slow their expansion Pharaoh demanded that the Hebrew midwives kill the male babies and save the females. This diabolic order set the stage for Amram and Jochebed to place their newborn son, Moses, into hiding. What an incredible story is his! Moses became the adopted son of the princess and was raised with all the advantages that life in Egypt could offer.

Though Moses will take center stage in eighty years to confront Pharaoh and demand Israel's freedom his birth brought little comfort to those mired in slavery. Israel sought immediate relief yet God's timing followed another course, and He allowed the suffering to continue. God was aware of Israel's suffering, and He strategically placed the pieces to resolve the slavery problem. Consulting the record of Scripture we find this encouraging summary.

Now it came about in the course of those many days that the king of Egypt died. And the sons of Israel sighed because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their bondage rose up to God. So God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them.

Exodus 2:23-25 NASB

As the now fully-grown Moses tended sheep on the backside of the desert God appeared to him in the form of a burning bush. Moses demonstrated a reluctance to serve and generated a stream of excuses as God shared the plan for Israel.

## Does God Care About Our Suffering?

The LORD said, “I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings. “So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite. “Now, behold, the cry of the sons of Israel has come to Me; furthermore, I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them.

Exodus 3:7-9 NASB

Did God care about Israel? Was He aware of their status? Look at His comments.

- I have seen the affliction of my people.
- I have given heed to their cry.
- I am aware of their sufferings.
- I have come down to deliver them.
- The cry of the sons of Israel has come to me.
- I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them.

Moses carried God’s message to Israel, “I am indeed concerned about you and what has been done to you in Egypt.”

“Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, ‘I am indeed concerned about you and what has been done to you in Egypt.

Exodus 3:16 NASB

But the slavery situation grew worse. Pharaoh, put out with the request to free Israel, demanded the daily quota of bricks from his slaves but refused to provide the raw materials. Beatings and verbal abuse became the norm. The people began to wonder about God’s concern for them and took their frustrations out on Moses.

When they left Pharaoh’s presence, they met Moses and Aaron as they were waiting for them. They said to them, “May the LORD look upon you and judge you, for you have made us odious in Pharaoh’s sight and in the sight of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to kill us.”

Exodus 5:20-21 NASB

God provided a second message of hope...

“Furthermore I have heard the groaning of the sons of Israel, because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant. “Say, therefore, to the sons of Israel, ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. “Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

Exodus 6:5-7 NASB

- I have heard the groaning of the sons of Israel.
- I have remembered My covenant.
- I am the LORD.
- I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.
- I will deliver you from their bondage.
- I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments.
- I will take you for My people.
- I will be your God.

- You shall know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

In the midst of suffering we either believe God's promises and trust His character, or we don't. Either way, He does not change.

## **The disciples battling a storm at sea**

(Matthew 8:23-27, Mark 4:35-41, Luke 8:22-25)

Things were going great for the disciples—part of an elite team, daily training sessions with Jesus, and front row seats as the Son of God ministered to and taught truth to the multitudes. Adventures waited as Jesus commanded the group to cross the Sea of Galilee to new mission fields.

Those moments when all is well and everything seems right tend not to last long. In fact with a few years of life experience behind us and a few ministry roles under our belts we almost grow to expect the adversity, don't we? Things are going great and next thing we know, "Ka-pow!" Right in the kisser!

Jesus curled up on the seat cushion and fell asleep as the disciples manned the oars to propel the boat to the opposite shore. The Savior with His human body did experience exhaustion, and those of us who have preached or taught classes know to some extent the drain that He felt after hours of continuous ministry.

Into that peaceful scene, as the disciples rowed quietly so as not to disturb the Boss, came a storm. Matthew, Mark and Luke all share an account of this event though Matthew was the only one of the three who bailed water that night, and he described it as a great storm. Mark, likely relating Peter's memories, painted it as "a fierce gale of wind" with "the waves ... breaking over the boat so much that the boat was already filling up."

Peter's time as a fisherman gave him concern that the lake was the worst place to be during such a storm, and panic spread through the group like kudzu across a southern farm. Each writer recorded the panic in his own words, and Jesus awoke to one desperate chorus from his disciples:

- "Save us, Lord; we are perishing!" (Matthew 8:25)
- "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" (Mark 4:38)
- "Master, Master, we are perishing!" (Luke 8:24)

Let's review. What command had Jesus given as the boat left shore for the voyage? Was it not, "Let us go over to the other side of the lake." (Mark 4:35, Luke 8:22) He had not promised that the team would travel to the middle of the lake and drown, had He?

How easily we forget the promises and commands of God as the storm rages around us. How easily we panic with the certainty that our destruction is at hand. And how often do we row and bail with gritted teeth and a flinty countenance wondering how Jesus could possibly be asleep at such a time?

Does He not know the situation? Is He unaware of the gravity of the moment? Does He not care?

Those moments of despair, when all seems lost to us, are the moments when the God of the impossible steps in and shines. He is fully aware of the fierce storm, and His love for you and me is not reduced in the least by a tempest.

I love Peter's words in 1 Peter 5:7. The old disciple with miles and years behind him had discovered a helpful truth to depend on when adversity strikes.

casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.  
1 Peter 5:7 NASB

He cares for you! Don't wait until full-blown panic sets in. Talk to Him.

## Conclusion

Suffering comes in many forms.

Sometimes it descends as an army with one adverse circumstance after another.

Sometimes it is a long painful slog through disheartening sameness.

Sometimes it arrives as a lightning punch to the gut for which we weren't prepared.

But God never changes, and yes, He is aware of our suffering. May we always remember that...

- God allows suffering in the lives of those He loves.
- An understanding of God's timing and purpose lies beyond our comprehension even as His eternality extends beyond our finite existence.
- God's plan is much larger in scope than any we may derive for ourselves.
- God desires to use us in His way according to His schedule for His purpose.
- God may not reveal the details of His workings.
- Our moments where failure seems certain represent God's moments to shine.

# HELPFUL REFERENCES

For more information on suffering check out these helpful resources.

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# MEET JOHN W NICHOLS



## About me

I'm a normal guy experiencing life with all it brings. I love working in the garden and tinkering in the shop. My favorite flavor of ice cream is vanilla.

I am a quiet man who avoids large crowds and noisy surroundings. I've discovered that I learn more when I'm not speaking and make it a habit to live with my ears open.

I write from Raleigh, North Carolina, where I enjoy the company of my wife and best friend, Shawn. We are empty-nesters with two precious daughters, two wonderful sons-in-law, and two outrageously adorable grandchildren. The roles of husband and father have been the greatest learning experiences of my life, and my education continues with the promotion to grandpa.

As a writer I can share ideas, experiences, and lessons I've learned. I hope to make my readers laugh, cry, consider, evaluate, and think, "I get it." In that moment we will be joined across time and space, and that is the marvel of words.

I would love to hear from you. Your suggestions, comments, and feedback are valuable. Please email me: [john@nicholsnotes.com](mailto:john@nicholsnotes.com).

## My work

I blog at two sites:

[nicholsnotes.com](http://nicholsnotes.com)

[godplantedagarden.com](http://godplantedagarden.com)

and curate a third site:

[biblebuildingblocks.com](http://biblebuildingblocks.com)

The majority of the material on these sites is original content. I have published articles for magazines and have created content for church publications.



## Does God Care About Our Suffering?

I have several books available on Amazon.

Hold Fast: Honch Wilson Adventure #3

Unmasking Satan

Small Group or Sunday School?

Quest for the Perfect Wife

Never Give Up: Honch Wilson Adventure #2

Go Eat the Cheese

Go for the Gold: Honch Wilson Adventure #1

The Giving Grandpa

Help! My Daughter's Getting Married!

Who Ate My Cheese?