

Ten Words That Changed Everything About My Suffering

Article by

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God permits what he hates to accomplish what he loves.

I remember it like it were yesterday. I was fresh out of the hospital, barely out of my teens, and sitting at our family table with my friend Steve Estes with our Bibles and sodas. We had become acquainted when he heard I had tough questions about God and my broken neck. He also knew I wasn't asking with a clenched fist, but a searching heart.

So, Steve made a bargain with me. I'd provide sodas and my mother's BLT sandwiches, and he would provide — as best he could — answers from the Bible. Though I cannot reproduce our exact words, the conversations left such an indelible impression on me that even now, over fifty years later, I can capture their essence.

"I always thought that God was good," I said to him. "But here I am a quadriplegic, sitting in a wheelchair, feeling more like his enemy than his child! Didn't he want to stop my accident? *Could* he have? Was he even there? Maybe the devil was there instead."

Decades later, Steve would tell me, "Joni, when I sat across from you that night, I was sobered. I mean, I had never met a person my age in a wheelchair. I knew what the Bible said about your questions, and a dozen passages came to mind from studying in church. But sitting across from you, I realized I had never test-driven those truths on such a difficult course. Nothing worse than a D in algebra had ever happened to me. But I looked at you and kept thinking, *If the Bible can't work in this paralyzed girl's life, then it never was for real.* So, Joni, I cleared my throat and I jumped off the cliff."

God Permits What He Hates

That night, Steve leaned across the family table, and said, "God put you in that chair, Joni. I don't know why, but if you will trust him instead of fighting him, you will find out why — if not in this life, then in the next. He let you break your neck, and perhaps I'm here to help you discover at least a few reasons why."

Steve paused and then summed it up with ten words that would change my life:

God permits what he hates to accomplish what he loves.

The sentence hit me like a brick. Its simplicity made it sound trite, but it nevertheless enticed me like an enigmatic riddle. It seemed to hold some deep and mysterious truth that piqued my fascination. “Tell me more,” I said. “I want to hear more about that.” I was hooked.

“God permits what he hates to accomplish what he loves.”

Over that summer with Steve, I would explore some of the most puzzling passages in Scripture. I wanted to know how God could permit hateful things without being in cahoots with the devil. How could he be the ultimate cause behind suffering without getting his hands dirty? And to what end? What could God possibly prize that was worth breaking my neck?

He Does Not Afflict Willingly

So, let me parrot some of Steve’s counsel to me that summer. He started off with [Lamentations 3:32–33](#):

Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men. (NIV)

In the span of a verse, the Bible asserts that God “brings grief,” yet “he does not willingly bring . . . grief.” With that, Steve was able to reassure me from the top that although God allowed my accident to happen, he didn’t get a kick out of it — it gave him no pleasure in permitting such awful suffering. It meant a lot to hear that.

But what about my question of who was in charge of my accident? When it comes to who is responsible for tragedy — either God or the devil — Lamentations 3 makes it clear that God brings it; he’s behind it. God is the stowaway on Satan’s bus, erecting invisible fences around the devil’s fury and bringing ultimate good out of Satan’s wickedness.

Buck Stops with God

“God’s in charge, Joni, but that doesn’t mean he actually pushed you off the raft,” Steve said. [Numbers](#)

[35:11](#) pictures someone dying in an ‘accident,’ calling it ‘unintentional.’ Yet elsewhere, of the same incident, the

Bible says, 'God lets it happen' ([Exodus 21:13](#)). It's an accident, but it's God's accident. God's decrees allow for suffering to happen, but he doesn't necessarily 'do' it."

These were deep waters: God decreeing, but not necessarily doing? When I pushed Steve further, he smiled. "Welcome to the world of finite people trying to understand an infinite God. What is clear is that God permits all sorts of things he does not approve of. He allows others to do what he would never do — he didn't steal Job's camels or entice the Chaldeans to seize Job's property, yet God didn't take his hand off the wheel for a nanosecond."

Then he added, smiling, "So, the buck stops with God, Joni, even when people think he had nothing to do with your accident, that it was all *your* responsibility for taking a careless dive into shallow water!"

Okay, I got it. God permits what he hates. But what about the next part — the part about him permitting awful things in order to accomplish what he loves? I still could not imagine what good and lovely thing would be worth the horrible cost of pain and quadriplegia.

Who Crucified Jesus?

When it comes to the old cost-versus-benefit problem, God first put himself to the test. He willed the death of his own Son, but he took no delight in the actual agony. God planned it, but Satan was the instigator.

Think of the treason, torture, death, and murder that led up to Christ's crucifixion. How could those awful things be God's will? Yet Judas Iscariot and the whole bunch, including the Romans who nailed Jesus to the tree, did "whatever [God's] hand and [God's] plan had predestined to take place" ([Acts 4:28](#)).

So, God as much as said to everyone who screamed for Christ's crucifixion, "Okay, so you guys want to sin? When you do, I'll make certain you do it in a way that maintains your guilt, yet performs my will!" In short, God steered their devilish scheme to serve his own marvelous ends. A divine plan that would bring good to his people and maximum glory for himself.

"And the glorious plan that was worth the horrible cost of the cross was," Steve said quietly, "salvation for a world of sinners." I would soon learn how suffering and sin are related.

Defeating Evil with Evil

“Joni, he cares about your afflictions, but they are merely symptoms of a deeper problem. God cares less about making you comfortable, and more about teaching you to hate your transgressions and to grow up spiritually to love him.

“In other words, God lets you feel much of sin’s sting through suffering, while you are heading for heaven. And it should constantly remind you of what you are being delivered from. So, one form of evil, your pain and paralysis, is turned on its head to defeat another form of evil, and that is your bitterness, resentments, anxieties, fears, and I could go on — all to the praise of God’s wisdom.”

It was becoming clearer. God permitted what he hated on the hill of Calvary to accomplish what he loved — my salvation and his honor in saving me. So, Satan ended up slitting his own throat, because the world’s worst murder became the world’s only salvation.

Suffering for the Rest of Them

“Joni, this perfectly parallels your life,” Steve said. “God permitted what he hated — your spinal cord injury — to accomplish what he loves, and that is ‘Christ in you, the hope of glory’” ([Colossians 1:27](#)).

“But it doesn’t stop with you,” Steve reminded me. “Just as Christ had to suffer to reach a lost world, you too will learn to suffer for the sake of others. It’s no secret. He wants your afflictions to be a platform to win others to Christ.” My story, then, is much like the story of Joseph and his wicked brothers.

Joseph flat-out said to them in [Genesis 50:20](#), “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that *many people should be kept alive, as they are today.*” Yes, God permitted my hateful paralysis, but his love goes far beyond Christ in me. He wants *others* to experience Christ in them, *their* hope of glory!

Fifty Years Later

It has been over fifty years since that summer when I spent so many nights with Steve by the family table. He is now senior pastor at Brick Lane Community Church in Pennsylvania, while I am a “Joseph” being used of God at Joni and Friends to save lives by telling people with disabilities the good news.

People are sometimes mystified by my joy, especially since I now deal with chronic pain. But God shares his joy on his terms, and those terms call for us, in some measure, to endure suffering, as did his precious Son. But that's okay. For when I hold fast to God's grace in my afflictions, the joy he gives tops everything. It's how my so-called hateful paralysis now makes me so happy.

Yet nowhere near as happy as I will be in heaven. "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" ([2 Corinthians 4:17](#)).

"God will exponentially atone for every tear, and will abundantly reward us for every hurt."

True, God permits awful things, but (to paraphrase Dorothy Sayers) something so grand and glorious is going to happen in the world's finale that it will more than suffice for every pain we experienced on this planet. God will exponentially make up for every tear ([Psalm 56:8](#)), and will abundantly reward us for every hurt ([Romans 8:18](#)). Best of all, God will make plain the mysterious ways of his will.

Has Horrible Happened to You?

So, I pass these ten words to you: "God permits what he hates to accomplish what he loves." If you are struggling as I once did, trying to understand how a good God could allow horrible things to happen in your life, let me jump off the cliff here.

God's decrees have allowed your afflictions. I don't know why, but if you will trust him instead of fighting him, you will find out why — if not in this life, then in the next. He permitted your hardships, and perhaps I'm here to help you unravel the beautiful riddle that will bless your life, enrich others, bring maximum glory to your Savior, and make your heavenly estate more joyful than you can now imagine.

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