

THEME: Where Was God When?

"The Providence of God"

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber - based on a sermon by Adam Hamilton
January 22, 2006 at First United Methodist Church - Durango

Scripture Readings - Romans 8:28, 31, 35, 37-39

28 And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. 31 What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? 35 Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? 37 No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. 38 And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. 39 No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. (NLT)*

As you are seated I want to invite you to take out your sermon notes and study guide for today. The sermon notes are an outline of today's message and I want to encourage you to write down things you would like to remember. Don't follow along too much because the sermon has changed form and shape since the sermon notes were put together!

The study guide on the reverse side contains daily reading from scripture and questions for you to reflect upon. They contain powerful passages from the Bible meant to speak to you and help you go deeper in our topic from today. I encourage you to read them during the coming week.

Today we bring to conclusion our series of sermons: "Where Was God When?" In our first two sermons we were doing a little deconstruction of some of your theology. Specifically, I challenged some of the common beliefs that many Christians and non-Christians have about what God does and does not do in our world. We are dealing with the issue of theodicy in these sermons. Theodicy is a fancy name for how we reconcile the problem of evil and suffering in our world with the belief in a good and loving God. How do those two things go together?

SLIDE Theodicy

And we are aiming at getting you to develop an adequate doctrine of providence. Providence is another fancy theological word that means...

SLIDE Providence = How God provides for his people—or how God works in the world to care for us.

It is very important you are clear about these two things. In the first two sermons we deconstructed some of the common beliefs people have like the one that...

SLIDE “Everything happens for a reason,” and “God is behind every single event that takes place.”

We noted that is inconceivable in many ways. How is it that God could make or want a father to abuse his child, or a woman to drown her children, or a nation to slaughter its own people? We challenged that idea. Some of you sent me email or notes or even called me about that sermon. You said, “Jeff, you are really messing with my head! I have held this for so long and now I am really confused and I don’t understand. If God doesn’t make everything happen for a reason, then what does that mean for me?” I asked you to hold on and wait for sermon number three!

Last week, we talked about suffering and sickness and how it is not God’s plan and mode of operating to make people sick. God does not inject cancer cells into people’s bodies. That is not how God works! You would not do that to your children, how can we think God would do that to his children? Some of you said to me, “Jeff, what’s the deal? Don’t you believe God is really in control of everything?” Yes, I believe God is in control of everything, but there are certain ways God works and certain ways God doesn’t work in our world.

We also talked about prayer, and a number of you wrote me about this. After last week’s sermon, some of you asked why we should even pray at all since God does not seem to answer our prayers. Many times we get disappointed with God because when we pray we expect that instant miracle. But God does not provide the instant miracles very often and what makes them miracles is that they are rare. Some of you asked, “Don’t you believe that God answers prayers? I believe that—don’t you Pastor Jeff?”

I want to be clear that I believe God answers prayers. I see God answering prayer all the time, but not always the way we pray them. I have seen enough times where I have prayed earnestly for people and they are not made whole, that I understand God works in certain ways more often than others. So we did some

deconstruction with you and a number of you sent me notes and emails asking for a sneak preview of this week's sermon because you were really struggling. Most of you were disappointed when I told you to pray and just hang on until Sunday. You're going to be okay!

Others of you have said this has helped you so much, and clarified some things you were really confused about. It is very important that you understand how God works in the world and how God interacts in our lives. It's important because you will face circumstances where your faith will be blown away if you are not prepared to answer those questions.

Today we turn to one last story from within our congregation. It's the story of the Martens family—Lynn, Chuck, Hannah and Cole. A number of you know the Martens and you will find if you spend time with them that they are amazing people of faith. I invite you to hear their story...

VIDEO Martens 1

Many of you, at some point in your life, have experienced that kind of disappointment. You have felt like God has turned his back on you, or that God did something to you that hurt you or God failed to do something to help you. When our dreams evaporate, we don't think about how much worse it could have been, instead we focus on the things that did not happen right and how painful the experience was.

All of you in this room will have a time in your life where your dreams and hopes are dashed, and your initial reaction will be to be angry with God and to be fundamentally disappointed. You might even just walk away from your faith. This is why it is important you understand what God does and what God doesn't do.

We have noted in the past that God does work by doing magic. It is not God's normal mode of operating to suspend the laws of nature and do wonderful and miraculous things just for us. He created the laws of nature and most often abides by those laws. We also established that God gave us the gift of free will. God allows you to be a free moral agent and makes choices, even though those choices might hurt you or other people. God gives you the awesome freedom and responsibility to do good or do wrong—to be a blessing or to be a curse. God will not take that freedom away from you.

One of you wrote this past week to me and asked, "If that's the case, then what is the use in being a Christian? Does God even really work in our world? Does God just stand back at a distance and watch what we do in the world and how

we live our lives?” Far from it, is my answer. God is very active in our world and is constantly acting in our lives. God does not stand off distant, but is working every moment of every day in our lives. But, God’s primary mode of operating is not the miraculous and supernatural.

SLIDE God’s primary mode of working in the world is through PEOPLE.

You are the agency by which God accomplishes his purposes and his tasks in the world. That is clear when we read the Scriptures. We read the Genesis account of how God created men and women and gave them the earth to live in. God created all the natural resources of the world, and then all the vegetation and the animals. Then as his crowning work of creation he made human beings. Psalm 8 captures the essence of this.

SLIDE O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars which you set in place, what are human beings that even care about them—or the Son of human beings that you are concerned about them? For you have made them a little lower than the angels, but you have crowned them with glory and honor. You made human beings ruler over the works of your hands. You put everything under their feet. O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

God created you and put everything else under your authority. He gives you dominion the ability to work and rule in this world. God is not here manipulating things on this planet. God created human beings and put you in charge. Now you can doubt God’s sanity in that, but please don’t doubt God’s presence or his love for you that he would give you such power! When God seeks to work in the world, his primary way of working is through YOU!

You know that if you have read the stories in the Bible. You find that God is constantly and primarily using human beings. When God wanted to create a nation of people that would be light for the rest of the world, who did he call? He called Abraham and Sarah, a man and a woman. He tells Abraham you will have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and your descendants will be a light to the nations. Abraham questions God and Sarah laugh because they are old, but it is not that God himself who will be the light, but instead God will use people because God works through people.

The best part about that story is that Abraham and Sarah were elderly and decrepit when God chose them. Do you know why? Because God wanted us to

know that he uses ordinary and even the least likely of people to accomplish his purposes. These were the least likely candidates to create a nation that would be a light to the world.

When God's people were slaves in Egypt for over 400 years and they cried out to God for help, what does God do to set them free? God could have gone directly to Pharaoh. Can't you see Pharaoh sitting on his throne, and glory of God comes right into the throne room? Pharaoh's knocked off of his throne and going into cardiac arrest as God says to him in a vision, "Now let my people GO!" God could have done that, but that is not how God operates. Instead, you remember that he called Moses from the wilderness. Moses who had a stuttering problem was sent by God to Pharaoh and told to say, "Let my people gggggo!"

Or how about the giant Goliath who was taunting the Israelite people and said, "If any of your men will come and fight and defeat me, we'll become your slaves." These are the arch enemies of Israel. So what does God do? He chooses a scrawny little shepherd boy named David, the smallest of all the sons of Jesse, to destroy the giant. God sent a person because God speaks through people.

And when God wanted to speak to his people Israel when they were disappointing and moving astray, what did he do? He did not come directly in the lightening and thunder, but instead sent prophets to them.

When God wanted to reveal himself to humanity, and wanted us to know who he is and what he is like—when he wanted to redeem us and save us—what did God do? God came to us as a person. He came not just as any person, but as a baby of all things, to be the savior of the world. God works through people.

God works through you. Understand that God does not work through people by coercion, but instead by influencing us. God will never force us to do his will. Yes, God has a plan and dream for your life, but God gives you the choice to decide, "Will I answer God's call and pursue his plan for my life, will I do the things God put me on this earth to do, or will I ignore him?" Yes, God let's you ignore him if you want.

A number of years ago, there was a popular saying that was going around. When you are talking to someone and giving them a bit of a lecture, they would stick out their hand and say, "Talk to the hand. Face ain't listening." I hope my children never learn that! You know what? God gives you the ability to do that. You can say to God, "I am not listening God. I am not interested."

You know what this is like. God does speak in our world, and not just to

Christians but to non-Christians as well. To all of the nations and tribes of the world, God speaks by his Spirit. But he does not shout, he whispers. You remember Elisha the prophet who was out in the wilderness, don't you? He asks to hear God's voice and know God's will for his life. Then there was an earthquake and he was sure God would speak in that, but God did not speak. Then there was fire and he was sure God would speak in that, but God did not speak in the fire. Then there was a terrible wind, and he waited and braced himself, knowing that God would speak that way. Then the wind disappeared, and there was total silence. Finally, Elisha heard a whisper, and that his how God spoke.

You have heard this whisper before. The whisper that said, "Don't do this. Please don't do this thing." Yet you refused to listen to it and you did it anyway, and you made a mess of your life. Or that whisper that was calling you to do something, yet you knew inside it was too hard and you just didn't want to do it, and so you said, "I'm not listening. I don't want to hear it."

Do you know how I think you ended up here today? Those of you who are not actively a part of this congregation, I think you heard a whisper. Sure, someone may have invited you to come, or told you about the sermon, but I believe God was whispering to you and saying, "come, come, come!" Every week-end before I preach, I pray to God and say something like this: "Lord, there are people out there who need this sermon. You know who they are. I pray by your Spirit you would prompt them once more. Beckon them and woo them so they will come, and they would be able to listen, and you would speak to them through the music or the sermon or the prayers or the people sitting next to them."

God has a plan for your life and God works through human beings and whispers his plan. It's up to us to listen. I think of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and all those who fought for Civil Rights in our nation. We celebrated his birthday this past week, and I have always been moved by Dr. King's sermons and the pastors who stood up in the face of great adversity after listening to God's whisper. A retired pastor who has been a mentor to me was serving a church during that time in our nation's history and preached integration from his pulpit after being prompted by the Holy Spirit. Over half his congregation left his church after that sermon. They went to a church that, in the words of one member, "understood what the Bible REALLY had to say about n_____s staying in their place!"

In the middle of all that God was speaking to the hearts of people, and some were saying, "I don't want to listen." Even some in the white churches who said, "The way things are now favors us and we don't really want to hear God." There

were others who began to listen. They began to work and to serve together and God raised up a mighty people who changed this nation and our world. That's how God operates in our world, through people who listen to his whisper.

When you are not a Christian, I believe God still whispers to you, but the voice of God is sort of muted. God is speaking to you and trying to move you in the right path that leads to himself. But when you become a Christian, the Holy Spirit takes up residence inside of you. This is what the Scripture teaches us, that suddenly we have a direct access to the line of communication. You have an opportunity to listen and to hear in a way you never had to before. This why we pray at the end of each baptism,

SLIDE “Holy Spirit, work within this person to help them become a faithful follower of Jesus Christ.”

When the Holy Spirit comes to live inside of you, God begins to speak to you in utterly profound ways. Over the last 20 years I have come to recognize his voice speaking to me. I don't hear it all the time, but there are times it is so clear I feel like God is saying, “This is where I want you to go next Jeff. This is what I want you to do.” There have been times when I have been praying for direction for our church with an important meeting coming up. I have been asking God, “What do you want us to do,” and I would walk into a meeting and instantly I would know the answer. But I usually don't say anything. Instead, I wait and see if anyone else has picked up on it, or if it's just me. 98 percent of the time, but the end of the meeting, every one in the meeting was saying the same thing. That is the Holy Spirit directing and guiding.

When you take Christians in whom the Holy Spirit is living, and who have surrendered to God's will, there you have the church. When you get thousands of people together who have that same heartbeat, and who are longing to do God's will, then watch out because that is power!

The Apostle Paul tried to make this crystal clear when he said, “You church, are the Body of Christ.” You are Christ's hands and voice in the world. You are the personification of Christ's physical and tangible presence.

When your friends shake their fists and say, “How could a good and loving God allow bad things to happen in this world?” You know on the one hand that God does not make those things happen, but there are still things that take place in this world that someone ought to do something about! Millions of people dying each year of AIDS; utter oppression that takes place in some places—and they

shake their fists and says, “If God was really God, he would do something about these things!” You know what God is saying when they do that? I have done something, I sent you! Do you know what else God is saying? “I wonder why my people aren’t doing anything?” Every indictment against God like that is truly an indictment against the church who are his people. There are 2 billion Christians around the world. Don’t you think we could figure some of this stuff out?

We have a weight of responsibility to do God’s work in the world. If we are the primary means by who God works in the world, can you feel the weight of that responsibility? This is why we have Christ Care and different support groups throughout the week in the church, because there are people who are hurting and we are the body of Christ and God wants us to care from them and bind them up. God uses PEOPLE to accomplish his purposes. This is why we help numerous families with scholarships so their children can be in our School. This is why 15 people will be traveling to the Gulf Coast in March from our church to work with those who have been hardest hit by Katrina. This is why we connect with a church in Romania to make sure they have a pastor. We go there as the body of Christ, as Christ’s hands and voice to do God’s work in the world. Do you see how it works?

That’s what Ed and Karla discovered. Last week we learned about the loss of one of their twins during a pregnancy 12 years ago. There were ministered to by their church at that time, who became the body of Christ. I asked them as I interviewed them two weeks ago, “Where did you see God at work?” Here’s what they said...

VIDEO Dudley 3

About a month ago you heard from Dr. Doug Miller who talked about his daughter being at Children’s Hospital in Denver at Christmas time two years ago. When they returned to Durango after over 1 month with their daughter in Denver, they found their house and tree decorated and meals waiting for them.

Who told those people to take them meals and care for them? The Holy Spirit, prompting his people to do his work and care for people who are hurting is who spoke to those persons. This is how God operates in our world.

God created the world and everything in it. That was a good thing. He designed the natural laws that bring order to our creation, and that was a good thing. He reveals to us his will by his Holy Spirit and that is a good thing. He chooses to work through human beings to accomplish his purposes and his will and that is a good thing.

We also know that God doesn't cause tragedies to happen, they just do sometimes. God doesn't plan cancer cells in the bodies of his children, or give them Cerebral Palsy, but we live in frail bodies and they are susceptible to illness which just happens. We also know that sometimes people who are mentally ill and are severely depressed, come to a place where they can no longer see hope. They can't even hear God whispering to them anymore. They begin to believe the lie that there is only one possible answer, and that is to take their own lives.

God doesn't do those things—they just happen sometimes. So you might say, "Fine preacher. Nice speech. Well, what does God do then? I understand he works through people and his Holy Spirit, but where is God when these things are happening? Why is it that when I was going through this hell, it felt like God was nowhere to be found? Was he even there? Does he even care? Does he just stand there, with his hands tied behind his back, waiting to send someone to me?" We talk about that as the...

SLIDE *Dark Night of the Soul*

Where you can't feel God's presence, and most of us come to those times in our lives. During those times we remember the promise of scripture. Beginning in the Old Testament, 35 times we find the same promise...

SLIDE *Fear Not, for I am with you.*

Even when you can't feel it, God promises, "I am with you. I will never leave you, nor will I ever forsake you," God says. C.S. Lewis said that those times you pray and you don't feel God are the most profound prayers of all. At those moments you are taking the most profound leaps of faith. What is faith? Remember from Hebrews 11:1...

SLIDE *Faith is the evidence of things hoped for and the substance of things not seen.*

You may not see him, you may not feel him, but God has promised you he is there. Sometimes days, or weeks, or years later, you look back and if you are looking carefully you can see he was carrying you the whole way, the whole time. Listen to how God speaks to us in from the prophet Isaiah in chapter 43. God says...

SLIDE *Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have summoned you by name and you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. When you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned. The*

flames will not set you ablaze, for I am your Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

God is saying through Isaiah, “You can count on the fact that this will happen. You are going to go through the water. You are not going to walk on top of it. Bad stuff is going to happen. You are going to go through the flame.” God promises that this will happen because you are human and you live in a world that is broken and fallen, but when you do don’t be afraid, because “I will walk with you.” Do you remember the last words of Jesus before he ascended into heaven?

SLIDE *“Lo I am with you always. Even to the end of the age.”*

There is one more thing that must be said about what God does in the face of tragedy. This thing is the best of all. It’s the thing we can’t see at the time. At the moment we are going through the tragedy, there is no way we can see this. So we have to accept it by faith and say, “I know this is how God works always.” How is that? Dr. Shirly Guthrie in his excellent book, *Christian Doctrine*, describes it in 6 simple words.

SLIDE **“God forces evil to serve him.”**

God doesn’t bring the evil. He didn’t make those bad things happen. People make choices; our bodies are susceptible to disease; there are natural laws that govern the universe and when we get in the way bad things can happen. Those things were not of God and they were not a part of his perfect plan, but when they happen, can and will force those things to bend to his good. God can and will bring joy and triumph out of tragedy. This is a promise and it always works.

This promise is why Chuck and Lynn Martens have been able to look at the birth of Cole through different lenses, really ever since they discovered he was a special child. Let’s listen in as they share what God has done in their family through Cole’s life...

VIDEO **Martens 2**

What a powerful testimony of what God can do through times that are tragic, or seem tragic to us on the surface. God takes those moments and forces them to accomplish his purposes, and he turns them into triumph. That is exactly what the Apostle Paul was saying in Romans 8: 28...

SLIDE *We know that ALL things work together for good for those who love God and those who are called according to his purpose. Who will separate us from the love of God in Christ? Will hardship or*

persecution or distress or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? No! In all of these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that either death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, no things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That is the answer that God gives. God is at work constantly in this world. God grieves when things go not according to his plan. He hates it when the wrong choices are made, and he is constantly prompting us by his Spirit for us to do the right thing and follow his will for our lives. He grieves when we make decisions that are painful for ourselves and others, but he gives us freedom to choose.

God understands our bodies were not made to last forever, and in those moments when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, he promises to be with us and that he will liberate us from this body and give us life eternal. God promises that no matter what happens in our lives, he will be there. Nothing can separate us from him even it feels like it's gone. Finally, he takes tragedy and turns it to triumph. That's what God does.

There are some of you sitting here today and you walked away from God a long time ago. You were angry at God for something you thought God did to you that God didn't really do. Or you turned away from God because you were expecting him to do something that he didn't do. Today I invite you, now that perhaps you understand, to come back to him. You have been resisting his will for a long time, even though you have heard his promptings. You have heard him beckoning to you and saying to with his Spirit, "I love you so much. Please come back!" And you've been running away.

But today is a divine appointment for some of you. You can feel it and you know the Holy Spirit is speaking to you. Do you know what he asks of you today? Only that you say, "Yes, Lord. I am tired of fighting against your will and struggling against you and running from you. Today I choose to follow you, and to serve you, and to give my life to you, so that I might accomplish you will and your purposes for my life." All you need to do today is simply say, "Yes."

So invite you to close your eyes and bow your head. If there are some of you here today and you feel God speaking directly to you, and you're ready to come back, and to allow his love to heal you, and to surrender your will to his will, and in that process to find such utter joy, then I invite you to pray this prayer quietly under your breath: *Lord Jesus, I accept you. I give you my life, and I want to do your*

will. Forgive my sins, and heal my heart. Help me once again to discover the joy of being your child. Thank you Lord for never leaving me all these years. I give my life to you, in your Holy Name. Amen.

The Providence of God

The Problem of Evil and the Providence of God
Romans 8:28, 31, 35, 37-39

28 And we know that God causes everything to work together* for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. 31 What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? 35 Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? 37 No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. 38 And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. 39 No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Introduction: Disappointment with God and the Purpose of this Series

I. What Does God DO?

- A. God _____ all that is.
- B. God is the _____ that gives life to everything
- C. God _____ the natural laws and processes
- D. Every _____ ultimately comes from God
- E. God _____ how to live
- F. God _____ his son to guide, direct, forgive and give us hope

But that's not all...

II. God's Will and Plan

- A. God's work in our world: God does not _____ but _____
- B. God has a plan for our world – a _____ toward which we are moving.
- C. God has an ideal will for your life...
- D. How God disciplines us...
- E. God's primary mode of operating...God works through _____
- F. How God reveals his will for us...

III. But Where Was God When...?

- A. "Fear not I am _____" – God's presence through the Holy Spirit
- B. God directed just the right _____ at just the right _____
- C. God forces evil to _____
 - 1. Joseph son of Israel
 - 2. Jesus and the cross
 - 3. Modern examples

Answers: I. A. created, B. energy, C. designed, D. good and perfect gift, E. teaches, F. sent, II. A. coerce, but influences, B. climax, E. people, III. A. with you, B. people at just the right time, C. serve Him.

This study guide is designed to allow you to dig deeper into the themes of the sermon. Study these passages with a friend, a Bible study group or on your own. This week we will examine some of the scriptures related to God's will and the way God works in our world.

Monday—God the Creator, Psalms 19 and 8 --- When we think of God's providence (the way God provides for and cares for us and the world) we first understand that God not only created all that is, but that God designed the forces and laws of nature, the raw material of our planet, and the systems which allow our bodies to function. Begin by making a list of all of the things that God has given us in nature, in creation, and in our bodies and minds that are a part of his provision for us (the first point of yesterday's sermon may help a bit). Often when we are disappointed in God we forget all that God has done for us and the wonder of these things. Let's read a few scriptures about this. Read Psalm 19 and Psalm 8. These are both known as "creation psalms." Note in Psalm 8 how God has made human beings rulers over creation – this ties back in to the source of much evil – the improper use of our power and freedom as human beings. Read James 1:16-17.

Tuesday—God's Whisper in Our Lives, I Kings 19:1-12 --- God is constantly at work in our world – but not by coercing and forcing human beings to do what he wills – instead he persuades and influences us by the promptings of this Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament we read the wonderful story of the prophet Elijah. In our text we read today of Elijah being threatened by the evil queen Jezebel. As you read this text, note how Elijah feels and what he is thinking, especially with regard to God. Notice in verses 11 – 12 how the Lord came to Elijah – it was not in the wind, fire, or earthquake. Read I Kings 19:1-12. When we read of the "Word of the Lord" coming to an Old Testament prophet how do you think that happened? Let's take a look at how God directs our path as described by Jesus in the New Testament. Read John 16:5-15. Note that the Spirit will conflict the world of guilt and sin and righteousness – what do you think this means? Have you ever experienced God speaking to you and guiding you, either through a sermon, scripture reading, or the interior witness of the Holy Spirit? How and when has this happened? This is part of God's providence and care and his active work in the world – guiding us and leading us into his will.

Wednesday—Suffering in the Hands of God, Romans -- In Sunday's sermon we quoted Dr. Shirley Guthrie from his excellent book, *Christian Doctrine*, in which he writes, "Evil must serve God." What a powerful concept – that though God doesn't desire evil, and evil is the antithesis of God's will, even evil is forced to serve the purposes of God. We gave several examples of that in Sunday's sermon. The greatest example of this, of course, is the Cross – Jesus died at the hands of human beings who insisted on killing the only truly holy man who ever lived, God's own son – but God used their evil to deliver the world from sin. In the New Testament we find that God uses suffering in our lives for our good. Let's take a look at a few passages, some of which you may have read in prior week's study guides: Read Romans 8:28. What does this passage mean to you? Read Romans 5:1-6 and James 1:2-4. In each of these last two scriptures God was not

causing the suffering – it was inflicted, especially in James, by people who were persecuting Christians – but God used this evil to shape the heart and souls of the believers. How have you seen God take the bad things in your life and use them for your good?

Thursday—God’s Promise to Be With Us, John 14:15-27 --- One of the regular promises of the Bible is that God will always be with us. Read Matthew 28:20 the last line – and the last promise of Jesus before he ascended to heaven. Throughout the Bible we are told not to be afraid for God will be with us. Read John 14:15-27. Here Jesus explains how God is with us – through his Holy Spirit. We have already learned of the Holy Spirit’s guidance in our lives. What else does the Holy Spirit do in the life of a believer? Read Romans 8:9-27. List on a piece of paper what Paul says that the Holy Spirit does in our lives. Note verse 18 – one of the great verses in the New Testament. In verses 19 – 23 Paul speaks of all of the creation here on earth experiencing difficulty until the day when Christ returns – sin has infected all of creation – our planet itself suffers under our improper use of freedom, and it anxiously awaits (groans) for the day when God will restore all things.

Friday—God Uses People to Accomplish His Purposes, I Corinthians 12 --- We often long for God to directly intervene in our world. We wonder why God doesn’t simply heal all we pray for. Why does God not eliminate evil people by striking them down before they kill or abuse? We are frustrated with a God who could unravel the mystery of illnesses but does not do this for us. We wonder why God doesn’t feed all of the children of the world. And we often feel God is absent in our crises. But a major theme through the entire Bible is that God accomplishes his work through human beings. He used Noah, and Abraham and Sarah, and the nation of Israel. He used Moses, Miriam and Pharaoh, David and Solomon, Ruth and Esther, the judges and the prophets. When God most directly intervened in our world, he came as a baby and lived as a man for 33 years. And today, the Church is called to be God’s continuing presence in this world. Read I Corinthians 12:1-27. Here we find God’s primary mode of operating being identified. This places a huge responsibility for the state of the world squarely on the shoulders of the church and individual Christians. How does God accomplish his purposes through the church and individual Christians? What does this mean for how you live and respond to suffering and evil in the world?