

## Engage360 | Episode 37: The Sovereignty of God and the Church as His Agent amidst Suffering

- Introduction: Welcome to Engage360 Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.
- Dr. Don Payne: Welcome back to Engage360 from Denver Seminary. I'm Don Payne and on behalf of everybody here at Denver Seminary, we want to thank you for spending a little bit of your time with us. This week, we are going to do something a bit different. I'm joined again by our President, Dr. Mark Young, and I'm going to turn the mic over to Mark because he is actually going to host this week's episode Mark.
- Dr. Mark Young: Thanks a lot Don, I guess the first question is, do you feel pretty nervous now that you're not the one who gets to ask the questions and drive the conversation?
- Dr. Don Payne: It is a bit unnerving. It's, it's triggering all of my control issues.
- Dr. Mark Young: Yeah. Well, thanks for allowing me to kind of take the wheel here for just a brief time and for everyone to know. The reason we talked about switching is because Don and I were having a conversation about our topic today and I felt that what he had to offer was a very valuable, far more valuable than what I could have added to the, to this topic. And so that's why I suggested that we switch roles. So today we're also joined by our good friend Philip Yancey. Many of you know Philip through his writing, we were talking earlier about some of the ways that God has used him to talk specifically about the question of how we think about God in the midst of something like a pandemic. How do we put him into this type of scenario and how do we then live our faith in the midst of suffering? Phillips been writing about this for a number of years. His books have made a huge difference in my life as well, and as well as in the lives of many, many people. So Philip, thank you for being willing to join us today.
- Philip Yancey: You're quite welcome. I was going to say my pleasure, but this is not a topic that usually lends itself to pleasure.
- Dr. Mark Young: That's a very good point. Yes. And in fact it is. Well, we'll frame our conversation today with the simple fact that as we interact with others, with our friends, our colleagues, our neighbors, and the topic of course comes up about the pandemic that we're experiencing with the Coronavirus and then the illness COVID-19, the question often arises, well, where is God in this? Or if God is in control, as we like to say, as Christians, how come this is happening? Why is this happening to us as a nation? So let's just start with that simple question. When a Christian says God is in control, particularly in the midst of a situation like we're facing today, what do you think they mean? And what do you think they want it to mean?

Philip Yancey:

I think they probably want it to mean that God would relieve us somehow that God would, through direct intervention, change the laws of the planet and destroy this virus. I have looked very carefully at every possible passage in the Bible, and frankly, I've concluded that the Bible doesn't give us a why answer. If anyone had a right to that question being answered, it would be the biblical character Job. And God had plenty of opportunity because the longest single speech by God in the Bible, it appears at the end of Job. And yet he avoids why question completely. I remember a quote from Frederick Beachner who said, "to try to explain the workings of the universe to Job, would be like trying to explain Einstein to a little neck clam." And I find nowhere in the Bible when Jesus was on earth, people had these theories, much like Job's comforters. The Pharisees and the disciples, whenever they would find a case of suffering, would come up with a neat theory. Okay. Who sinned? The blind man or his parents? Why did those people get killed in the tower that fell? Why did those people get killed in the terrorist incident in the temple?

Jesus never answered that question. He always avoided it and basically said, if a tower fell on you, would you be ready? There's something that the bystanders can learn, but he never answered the question why, and I think one reason the biblical writers didn't seem that concerned with the question is because they, from the very beginning, saw this as a planet, that God was not pleased with, an incomplete, a broken or theologians would say, fallen planet, an invaded planet and evil. God is not the source of evil, but part of God's plan. God's story for the whole planet involves a period when evil, it does do its work. It's bad work. We know how God feels about suffering because God gave us a face, the face of Jesus. And I tell people, if you want to know how God feels about people who are going through hard times like this Coronavirus, just followed Jesus around. See how he responds to a widow who lost her only son or even a Roman soldier, an occupying soldier whose servant fell ill and Jesus always responded with comfort and healing. That was a major part of his mission on earth. He certainly didn't cure all the problems in the world. He didn't heal everybody in the world, just a small minority. But he us a clue, a very striking clue as to how God feels about this. It's the bad things going on in this planet. And when his friend died, Lazarus, he cried. When he faced suffering himself, he cried and pleaded, is there any other way? Let this cup pass from me. So the first thing is to say that God is not pleased with the things going on in this planet.

And I learned from Jesus that God is on the side of the one suffering, not against the sufferer, not causing the suffering, but on the side of the one who is grieving, on the side of the one who is hurt. And when I've been called to difficult places after school shootings and tsunamis and places like that, I can stand with full confidence and say, you're grieving. God grieves more. You feel bad about the things that have happened. God feels worse. God plans to restore this planet to God's original intention. And we just celebrated Easter here a few weeks ago and that's the template, this great period of suffering, the worst thing that could possibly happen, the murder, the execution of God's own son, and yet God was able to turn that into a day that we now call Good Friday. Not sad Friday, tragic Friday, dark Friday, but Good Friday. Because even God son on

earth was not exempt from the suffering, but that's not the end of the story and I think we can only judge the story when it reaches its end and we've got some real strong clues in the New Testament on what that's going to look like. There will be no more pain. There will be no more tears. The lamb will lie down by the lion.

Dr. Mark Young:

Yes. Let's take a couple of themes. Philip, thank you so much for that way to kind of launch us into this hard, vast, and deep. I have a couple of themes there Don, I'd like for you to think about when we say back to the original question, God is in control. Yet as Philip pointed out, God isn't the author of evil. How do we bring together our concepts of the sovereignty of God, as if God is in control, and then the fact that evil exists without making God then the author or the source of evil.

Dr. Don Payne:

Yeah. That that takes us back to the theological topic of sovereignty, God's sovereignty and what it means for God to be sovereign. I don't know many Christians within the pale of historic orthodoxy who would hesitate to affirm that God is sovereign. But of course we find lots of variations among Christians and different traditions regarding how we think God exercises sovereignty, or how God's sovereignty iterates in terms of the way God relates to the world. So you'll find some who will talk about having a high view of sovereignty and the ones who will typically talk about having a high view of sovereignty will then refer to others as having a low view of sovereignty. And I've learned from one of my good colleagues here, that there really is no such thing as high and low sovereignty, right? God is sovereign or God is not. Now we can differ and debate on how we think, how specifically, how directly we think God exercises sovereignty. But that's a different sort of question. And I've had the growing opinion or conclusion over some years now without getting overly technical about this.

I tend to think that most Bible believing Christians, I know I'm broad stroking here, but I think most Bible believing Christians will read the Bible and read passages that talk about God's sovereignty through the lenses of a very kind of antiquated, Newtonian understanding of cause and effect. Now, they may not describe it that way or use that language, but you know, what we know about Newtonian physics is that cause and effect is fairly mechanical and linear and straightforward. And if that is the primary set of lenses through which we read comments in the Bible about God acting in the world, God doing something, God making something happen, that's the only way we have of understanding divine cause and effect. That creates quite a trap for us because automatically then we have to account for some really hard questions such as the ones we're entertaining right now. And what I have found to be very theologically helpful as well as personally and practically helpful is realizing that cause and effect in even the physical universe is far more complex. You know, the whole realm of quantum physics, quantum mechanics has shown us that there are many different forms of cause and effect, many of them nonlinear. And that gives us a much more flexible paradigm for understanding what it means for God. Not

simply to be sovereign, but for God to be in control without being directly responsible for evil.

Dr. Mark Young: So when we say, when we bring it up almost casually, sometimes we're going to get through this because God is in control. The desire of what we want it to mean is that it's going to turn out okay. We're going to find, I think sometimes we want to look back and say, we're going to see the answer to the question Phillip says God doesn't answer, why. But really what we're saying when we say God is in control. Simply a desire for us that it isn't as bad as it could be. That because of God's presence with us, there is a restraint of evil. That wouldn't be true if God weren't in control. Is that part of the language or part of the meaning where we're searching for in that phrase, God is in control in the midst of a pandemic.

Dr. Don Payne: That strikes me as being true that God's presence somehow in the world it does have that restraining influence. There's probably a dimmer side to it as well. And this goes back to what you said right before that Mark, that I suspect when we talk about God being in control, that's code for saying that things are not, they're not going to get too bad. And we have to come to grips with the fact that even under the sovereignty of God, well, what if they do? What if the worst case scenarios are realized? What does it mean then for God to be in control? And I think there's a real risk for all of us who take the scriptures seriously. There's a real risk for us to over read or over-interpret God's sovereignty as an attempt, I mean an understandable attempt but still an attempt to kind of read the tea leaves at the bottom of the cup or to see the pattern of what God is doing to make sense of it right now. And to Phillip's point earlier God does not seem overly concerned about exposing to us right now, the pattern of, of how God is working out the culmination of redemption.

Philip Yancey: To me, I like to think of it as two great forces. We know that God is perfect, God is good. And when God creates God creates only good every day of creation. He stopped said, that's good. That's good, that's good. That's very good. And yet God is humble enough if you can use that word that he allows freedom. And of course we had that even in the angelic hosts, we had a rebellion of Satan and The force of evil. There's two great forces. The force of evil takes things that are created good and distorts them almost everything we think of as evil is a distortion of good. Sex is a great good. Are people damaged by sex? Is it perverted? Absolutely. Yes. Food is a great good. Do people get addicted to food? Does it, do they use in self destructive ways? Absolutely. And so I see that force of evil constantly trying to find ways to distort pervert the good creation that God has made, and God's response is not to stop it from happening. Rather it's to take the bad that happens and somehow redeem it or recycle it. I would say God is the great recycler.

He takes things that as Paul says, were junk. We're like dumb and somehow turns it into fertilizer, a way of growth for me, the great chapter that helps understand God's sovereignty is in Romans 8, where Paul is very clear about the groaning planet. He says it's groaning and we Christians who have the spirit are

groaning within. No, we're not exempt from it. And then there's first that a lot of people misinterpret Romans 8:28 a lot of people when they read it, they think it says for those who love God, only good things will happen. It doesn't say that at all. It says, no matter what happens, God can use them for good in you. And then the rest of that chapter, Paul spells out some of the things in his life. It involved torture and prison and shipwreck and snakebite and a lot of bad things. But he finishes that chapter with the triumphant. There is no more triumphant passage where he says, nothing can separate us from the love of God. Not time, not space, not death even. He just lists everything you can think of. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. That is the end of recycling. That's the end of redemption. And that's what God has promised us. So we Christians believe that. And of course what happened on Easter is a beautiful, bright, shining example of what God can do with the worst that can happen. And think of Paul who had some pretty tough things had happened in his life. He didn't seem to be surprised by them. It didn't seem to threaten his faith. He trusted that God could take even the terrible things that were happening to him and turn them into good. And that's our responsibility as Christians to be on the side of that force, that recycling redemptive force.

Dr. Don Payne:

Yeah. And every passage that you're referring to fill up in I think second Corinthians where Paul Chronicles all of these. He has this interesting reflection, punctuating that where, where he says all this happened so that we would learn not to depend upon ourselves, but on God. Well, if you want like an end point or a purpose or a why, well maybe that's why. As much of a why that is accessible to us.

Philip Yancey:

Maybe so again, I don't find a clear why. Yeah. And I think you know, go back to God, his speech to Job. He told him, Job had been complaining, rightly so, the most righteous man on earth being abused the worst any one of us would have responded as Job did, this is not fair. Something's wrong here. God appeared, God's appearance alone silenced Job's questions immediately he said, I spoke with things I had no idea. You know, I repent in dust and ashes. But what God did was say, Job, let me tell you about some other things going on while you're obsessed, rightly so with your own situation here. And he gave him a tour of the universe. And that is a God's eye view that we can't possibly comprehend. And Job was asked to trust in something that seems irrational, impossible. I like a definition of faith that I came up with that faith means believing in advance what will only make sense in reverse.

And we're in the middle of a crisis. It's a global crisis right now. And it seems like such a waste. I think of all the Christian organizations, I'm sure Mark could tell us stories about fundraising in the time of Coronavirus, you know, and scrambling around to do online learning, and I'm sure you're praying, God, couldn't there be another way? You know, this is, I'm wasting so much energy and money and time, and it's just, it's a hard thing. And so when you're in the middle of it, you don't see how it can make sense. Right? But later you do.

Dr. Mark Young:

Yeah. This week we had some, my wife and I had some communication with one of our graduates who is serving as a chaplain in a senior care facility, residents. Primarily for those who suffer from cognitive disabilities or dementia? She has been with 14 patients who died. And she then had the responsibility to communicate with their loved ones because they can't come into the residents to be with the one who's dying. What do you think God is in control means to her?

Philip Yancey:

I was once on a secular radio station on a program I had, I was talking about the book, *Where is God When it Hurts?* And I'm sure the guy had not cracked the book and I'm sure when somebody handed it to him and said, this is your next guest, he rolled his eyes and said, Oh no, one of those religious guys. So the first question he said, okay, you're running a book called *Where is God When it Hurts?* can you just answer that in a sentence or two? You know, you love. And he kind of took me off guard and I said, well, like the first thing I would do is respond with another question, where is the church when it hurts? And God's answer to those 14 people was that Denver Seminary graduate. The church we are called, as Paul says in second Corinthians 1, we are called to represent the God of all comfort, the God of all comfort and the father of compassion. I love those phrases.

A lot of people don't think of that when they think of God, but that's how he's defined, the God of all comfort and the father of compassion. And he has designated us, us fallible, mistake prone human beings who follow Jesus, his son to be those agents of compassion, agents of comfort. That's our job. And when you look back over history, the church has done some things very well and some things very poorly. They've done a pretty good job actually, of dispensing comfort from the very beginning, the early centuries in the Roman Empire where the Christians would stay behind and nurse the sick as the pagans fled into the Hills. Rodney Stark, the sociologist at Baylor says, that's one of the main reasons for the growth of the church. People looked at how Christians responded to bubonic plague and said, I like the way they live, better than the way I live. I want to be one of those guys. And all the way through the first hospital in Bruges, Belgium, the first hospice that came out of the crusades, the founder of the modern hospice movement, there are so many historical examples. You know, Mark, that I've written several books with Dr. Paul Brand, who's a leprosy specialist. What a beautiful chapter in the History of Missions. The only people who were willing to reach out to this fear disease, people with leprosy were Christians and every major advance in the treatment and the understanding of leprosy came from Christian missionaries.

Not because they were necessarily the best doctors, scientists, nurses, but they were the only ones motivated by the father of compassion and the God of all comfort to go out and reach out. Same thing happened with Ebola, and there are many cases where it's happening, including what you just told us with the Coronavirus. There are Christians all over. I was watching just on Sunday I've been doing my virtual church around the world kind of, and I love this church Holy Trinity Brampton in London where the alpha movement came from. And

they had a pediatric nurse who was asked by one of her patients, can you teach me the guitar? Well, she happened to know the guitar. So she went around and I started teaching him the guitar and singing songs and other children said, could you come sing to me? So she started writing songs. These are children who are dying. She wrote songs about that beautifully. And then somebody submitted her name two Britain's got talent. And so she went on this show with all these glitzy performers and she's kind of in overalls, you know, not particularly made up. And suddenly she starts playing this song about what she would say to a mother who just lost her child. And that whole place just dissolved in tears. And here's old Simon, the crusty guy who vetoes everybody with tears running down his face.

And this tremendous standing ovation because she exposed our culture, our culture of ambition and glitz and sexiness and entertainment and celebrity and showed what really matters. What really matters is, what do you say to a mother who just lost her only child? And that's happening all over the world right now because there is a strong influence. And I've noticed when there's a crisis of health or disaster in the United States, like a 9/11 or the Coronavirus, watch the New York Times, they often have articles by atheists, people like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins. But when a crisis happens, who do they turn to? They turn to priests, rabbis, pastors. Because people need a word of comfort. They need that compassion. And if you stand up and say, well, the universe is just an accident and we're just a random collection of cells and it's all over when you die, and you've just lost your five year old son, that doesn't give any comfort, that doesn't give compassion. And it takes the church. And where is God when it hurts? We're in the middle of it right now. And sometimes we do it well. Sometimes we don't do it so well. But in the case of this woman with the 14 patients, she was where even their own most loved ones could not be. She was there in person and God was speaking through her. God was present through her.

Dr. Mark Young: That's an interesting observation, Don?

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, I was going to pick up on that. Phillip, you, and you had touched on this a bit earlier in your remarks that there's really no theologically responsible way of understanding God's control or God's sovereignty apart from the incarnation and the resurrection. And when those two monumental events are left out of the conversation of God's sovereignty, then then strangely, and I think kind of dangerously, our conversations about sovereignty can sound remarkably like conversations in any other faith tradition. Even the ancient pagans can have conversations about divine control, divine sovereignty that sound remarkably blank hours if we're not anchoring those or bracketing them with the incarnation and the resurrection. That really seems to me should define all the ways in which we think about divine control.

Dr. Mark Young: Well, that's a fascinating thought. I let me put together a couple of things here as we kind of race toward the end, and get your response to it. There is a stream of thinking that evil in the world must have a host and that oftentimes it's

humanity that provides the host for the expression and the destructive effects of evil. A virus has to have a host before its evil is wrought, before its destruction is wrought in humanity. What if we flip that to the other side and say this sovereign, the goodness, the sovereign goodness of our God also has a host known as first the Lord Jesus himself and now the Body of Christ. I heard a chaplain say recently, it's the blessing of the church to absorb the suffering of the world. And it seems to me that in many regards, it is our privilege as the people of God in absorbing the suffering of the world to live out, as you were saying, Philip, and on to be the, the presence of God's sovereign goodness in the world. Does that make sense to you? If you bring those ideas together in terms of the sovereign goodness of God, we being the host of that sovereign goodness and the presence of it in the world.

Philip Yancey:

I would go even further Mark and say, I'm convinced that Scott's plan all along. A lot of people when they read the Bible, they think, well, God tried this. Oh, that didn't work. Let's see. Oh, I'll send Jesus. Oh, that didn't work. You know, and no. When you look back, you can see that read Ephesians, read Colossians. God's plan was to reveal God's own self through human beings, who are bearers of God's image. And Jesus, of course, was the express image of the invisible God. As we're told, we're not the express image. We're badly flawed, inconsistent stained images. But bearing God's image means we are the only way in which the world around us will know what God is like. We reflect the image of God. And if we do that poorly, we turn people away from God. If we do it well, they'll say, Oh, that's what God is like. He's not that mean grandfather in the sky. He is the father of compassion and the God of all comfort. How do they know that? He's the person who loves your enemies. He's the person who brings peace. How do they know that? Only if God's followers demonstrate those qualities. That's what bearing the likeness means. And I think it gives God great pleasure. I think, frankly, I think that's what to put it crudely. That was what was in it for God by creating humans in the first place, to bring God pleasure, to see these ornery two legged human beings somehow go against their evil natures and demonstrate something of what God is like.

Dr. Don Payne:

And you know, we really have a precedent for that Mark, when you talk about us being that, that host, the precedent of course is the incarnation because we learned something of what God is like. How does God exercise? How does God defeat evil? How does God exercise evil other than letting evil be poured out in unfiltered ways on God's own self, and defeating it that way. Which again is I think why the incarnation and the resurrection, are the only genuinely Christian ways we have of thinking about both God's presence in suffering and God's victory over suffering. Because that's exactly what God did. That's, which for us seems, it's so counter intuitive that God would defeat evil by letting evil pour itself out on God's own self. And then winning the victory. And when we, to Philips' point, when we embody that, that's incredibly powerful.

Philip Yancey:

And that template, when you look at the passages on suffering in the New Testament, Romans 5, 1 Peter, James 1, they don't look backwards. They don't look at the why question. They look forward. Okay, the bad thing has happened,



but can it produce any good? Can any good come out of it? And they spell it out. Patients, hope, forbearance, discipline, you know, these kinds of things. And that's the, that is the pattern that we have. God can take, he is the great recycler. God can take bad things and turn it into good. And I'm sure 10 years from now we will be looking back on the year 2020 which we're in the middle of right now, and there will be many books and stories of how good things happened out of something that seemed like a tragedy and is a tragedy at the time. And yet out of that God can rest good God, can create good. And we who are in the middle of it, our job is to trust that. To trust a sovereign God, who is able to do that and ask how can we be a part of that recycling project, that redemptive project.

Dr. Mark Young: So let's kind of bring all this together here at the end with a very, kind of practical word to our brothers and sisters who are going to be standing in their driveway six feet away from their neighbor and hear their neighbors say you know, we're going to get through this. God is in control. How do we want to enter into that conversation with our neighbor if they say that that phrase to us when reflecting on the pandemic, Don, you want to jump in?

Dr. Don Payne: Wow. Well, I always want to affirm that yes, God is in control. And I think I would want to then maybe move into a conversation about what do we really mean by that and what does it mean for God to be in control and to bring about redemption and to bring about a beauty and wonder and glory and hope, even if we can't see how things are getting better or even if in any of our individual cases, things go worse before they go better. What does it mean for God to be in control? I think I'd want to steer a conversation in that direction and see what comes out of it.

Dr. Mark Young: Yeah. How about you Phillip?

Philip Yancey: I think of a couple of books written by a guy named Jerry Sitsor you guys may know him. He was a professor at Wentworth College and he had this terrible accident where he was driving with his entire family in a van and a drunk driver crossed the median and smashed into them. And they were in a remote area. It took a while for a helicopter to get there and Jerry held his mother and his wife and one of his children in his arms as each one died, three generations. And then a couple of other of his children were badly injured and he wrote a book called, *A Grace Disguised*. And when you read that book you think, how could anything good possibly come out of that? Well, flash forward, I think 15 years or so, and he wrote a sequel called, *A Grace Revealed* and it's the story, I'm sure in *A Grace Disguised*, he himself asked, is God really in control? Here I am a New Testament professor, but look at the chaos of my life.

Can anything good come out of it? And yet from that perspective, 15, 20 years later, he's able to look back and say, good did come out of it. And I'm convinced that that will be true too. I heard the other day that the Google searches for the word prayer have shot off the charts. People are searching. CS Lewis used the phrase that "pain is the megaphone of God," which I flinch at a little bit because

I don't think I've got standing there shouting at us. But I think of times like this as a time for us to turn up our hearing aids. Definitely the crisis gets our attention. So what are we going to do about it? Are we going to just wait till we get our economy back and have everything back to normal or are we going to say, wait a minute, you know, I'm going to die one day. How have I lived? Am I ready for whatever is next? And turn up our hearing aid, and I think there are many people all over the world who are doing that. And that's why they do Google prayer and that's why they do tune into churches when they wouldn't even walk in the door of a church. There are great opportunities going on right now and God is in control in God's own way. It's not a way that we can understand and it's a way that tolerates a lot of human freedom. God is a patient God. He intervened dramatically in cases in the Old Testament, but often after a long time. The Israelites in Egypt prayed for hundreds of years before God intervened to rescue them and yet they were rescued. God did come through, but several generations lived and died under slavery before that happened.

Dr. Don Payne:

Yes. Yes. Learning to trust God on God's own terms. One of the biggest stretches for us. Thank you, very well, Mark, thank you and Philip again, thank you as well and thanks to all of you who spent time with us and we hope you'll continue to do so. We hope you'll pray for us here at Denver Seminary, and if we can pray for you, and I mean this, please let us know that you can email us at [podcast@denverseminary.edu](mailto:podcast@denverseminary.edu). I am Don Payne and for Dr. Young and Philip Yancey, and everybody here at the Seminary, this is Engage360 and we hope to talk to you again next week. Take care.