

VIII. AN ENLARGED CONCEPTION OF GOD'S ROLE IN HUMAN SUFFERING

To this point we have learned that God does not cause suffering, but that He inflicts it on those who violate His standards. Sin and suffering among human beings came into existence originally as the result of the Fall of mankind; and some suffering comes on us because of our personal and individual violations of God's laws.

But what about those instances in which we suffer because of the violation of God's laws by other human beings and by Satan or his demons? In such cases, can we properly say that God is inflicting suffering on us?

Now it is true that, in an ultimate sense, in terms of mankind's original sin and our involvement in it, God inflicted our present suffering at the hands of others, in the sense that all human beings became corrupt and inclined toward evil as a result of the Fall, and that their present actions that cause us suffering flow from that corruption; and in the sense that mankind believed Satan and fell under his power as a result of the Fall, and that their present actions that are energized by Satan and cause us suffering flow from that Fall. When other human beings or Satan cause us suffering, we can say that in an ultimate sense, suffering is a judicial punishment for original wrongdoing and our involvement in it.

But in a proximate, near sense, can we say that God inflicts the suffering that other human beings cause? Or the suffering that Satan causes?

The answer appears to be a negative one. God does not appear to inflict suffering on individuals because of the sinful actions of other persons. Thus when another human being or Satan hurts me and causes me to suffer, it does not mean that God is inflicting suffering on me as a punishment for some sin I have personally and individually committed. It rather means that God is allowing or permitting me to suffer because of the sinful actions of others.

But is this a valid distinction? And is it important and meaningful to distinguish between God's infliction of suffering on me as a punishment for my individual sins, and God's permission of suffering to fall on me because of the sinful actions of others?

In order to test the validity of this distinction, let us briefly note four instances of suffering in Scripture.

(1) In Job, chapters 1 and 2, we find Job suffering terribly. Although he was a fallen sinner, and in an ultimate sense brought his suffering on himself, yet his suffering was not a punishment inflicted on him for his personal and individual sins, but was caused by Satan and permitted by God. That is, Job's suffering was not a judicial punishment that God inflicted on Job for his personal violations of God's laws.

(2) In John 9:1-3 we read of a man who was born blind. The account reads: "And as He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His