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The Sovereignty of Suffering: An Interview with Dr. John Currid on the Topic of Suffering

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Dr. Hulshof
THEO 324
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I interviewed Dr. John Currid on the topic of his book *Why Do I Suffer? Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*. The purpose of this assignment is to fulfill my honors petition requirement for this semester. This transcription ends partway through the interview.

Julia: My first question was... why did you choose to write on this topic; what was your motivation, because... not a lot of people want to write on it, and it is hard.

Dr. Currid: Being an Old Testament professor and being reformed, holding to the issue of the sovereignty of God: God being in control of all things, and all things [that] have happened are from His will, how can suffering be part of that? Because we think... “God is good, and how could He decree that someone could suffer?” So that was really the impetus of this: how do you... —especially from a reformed perspective—understand this? It seems almost *not right*. It seems unfair, in some ways... I talk in the book at the beginning about Rabbi Kushner, and his perspective is, “Well, these things are out of God’s control...” And [I think]... “That’s not what Scripture teaches.” He created everything, and He’s controlling everything, so how do we take care of that? It’s almost paradoxical, isn’t it... to view that?

Julia: Actually, my next question was about Rabbi Kushner. Do you think that his position—that God doesn’t have any control, and that things just kind of *happen* due to chaos—do you think that could provide comfort to anyone? Like it just seems so— ... if God can’t control *that*, then...

Dr. Currid: Sounds scary!

Julia: Yeah... do you think it can comfort someone?

Dr. Currid: ... It’s actually the opposite, isn’t it? Or it should be the opposite... I had a student who—I was teaching on this topic—and she stood up in class and said, “Well, I was going to look at a college, and my parents were driving me. And we were going through Alabama, got in a car accident, I watched both of them die.” And she said, “Without the sovereignty of God, I might as well have committed suicide.” See, there’s no answer... it’s like chaos is almost— It’s the old... philosophy Manicheism, which is, there’s good and evil in the universe, and they’re fighting and struggling [with] one another, and you never know what’s going to come out of that. That’s not comforting at all, but if we can try and understand that God, even in great suffering, is bringing about His good purposes for His people— Then, we’re onto something... and it’s very Scriptural...

Julia: So, you don’t think it could provide...

Dr. Currid: ... [He] even talks about... God's building His scaffolding... but the rest of the universe is just... up in the air. And that, to me, is like chance. And what comfort does chance give you?... It doesn't give you any comfort at all.

Julia: Kind of like... the Greek mythology, and... even the gods were looking down and they're [saying], "Wow, I really wish... this person's a really good person, but... fate says he's [going to] die, so... we can't go back on it..."

Dr. Currid: "There he goes..." ...[There's] very little sympathy or empathy... Scripture... that God... created the universe, He runs the universe, but He's very caring and loving, and that's why He sent His Son... The sympathy and empathy is there... He's not distant.

Julia: Yeah.

Dr. Currid: So even in our suffering— ... Chapter 23 of Job... says... "I look back, and I don't see God, and I look forward, and I don't see God. I don't see His steps anywhere, but... I know that my Redeemer lives, and I will be with Him one day"... It's a great teaching... That even in the midst of suffering, when you feel like you're abandoned, and you feel how painful it is, that's not the reality. The reality is God is with His people, even in the midst of pain.

Julia: Okay. And then this... next question relates to people who aren't believers... say I had a friend who wasn't a believer, and [they were] going through suffering. What... do you think would be an effective way to go about sharing the Gospel with them? Or is it even an appropriate time to use the Gospel, because I know it's just a painful time, and they don't want to even... think about anything...

Dr. Currid: It's hard... Often when unbelievers go through suffering... they're always asking why, and the world doesn't have an answer for that. And so a lot of... my pastoral care, and seeing people die, and being with them when that [happens]... [for] unbelievers... it's hopeless. And so actually this could be God prodding them to ask those questions... We are to give an answer of the hope that is within us. And... it can be great comfort to them. So, we've seen in our ministry... people come to the Lord on their deathbeds because otherwise, it's the abyss... What is there?

Julia: Yeah, it would be terrifying.

Dr. Currid: ... Exactly... We have to be careful how we do that, because we can... people can be kind of crass. They can say, "Well, this is God's will for your life: what you're going through." Well, that's [not going to] help. Rather than... [that], to do it in a gentle way, and in a loving way— ... This is pointing you to an answer, to a solution, to a hope, that's for God's people.

Julia: How would you address the sovereignty [of God]... Would that be a good topic to address then? ... Because they're probably going to be asking... "Well if He's good... why did He let it happen?" And how do you...

Dr. Currid: ... You don't want to get into a systematic theology class, when someone's undergoing suffering. But you want to give them comfort and hope, and the only true comfort and hope is in Christ... Augustine's famous line: "Our hearts are restless until they find a rest in Thee." ... That is especially true of people who are... suffering, because their world is rocked... and they don't know where to turn. They don't know what to do in that, so we have an answer. And we don't scold them: we don't, what I would call "preachy" to them, but point them to the right answer where there is comfort and hope. And... everybody's got to die, and I'm not sure many people think that or even believe that about themselves, [until] it comes.

Julia: [Yes], it is hard to comprehend.

Dr. Currid: It is... and... what comfort is there in, "... I was a pretty good person. I lived a good life." Whoop. Dead. Gone... well, *that's it?* ... *Is that it?* If that's it, eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die. So, you might as well do whatever you want to: however you want to live, because that's the end of things... That's just a vacuous reality, isn't it?

Julia: [Yes], it's strange to think about even a believer... dying, because there's... so little that we do know. And we do know a lot, but... There's a lot of questions...

Dr. Currid: ... That's why we're not sovereign, and we don't sit on the throne of the universe...

Julia: Exactly.

Dr. Currid: Because we don't know the answers to all those things, but we do know the big answer... So, we should not waver because... why would we fear death? ... It's amazing when you think of... Psalm 73. Why in the world do we envy unbelievers?

Julia: I know.

Dr. Currid: You[ask], "What?" Why would we? They're the ones who should be envious because of the treasures that we have... eternal life. And why would we envy the fact that... they drive a Mercedes?

Julia: That's this world, it's so— ... Because this world is so *here*... you can see it, you can touch it...

Dr. Currid: Right in your face, isn't it? It's physical...

Julia: And then... you see everybody driving the nice cars and wearing the nice clothes, and just to remember that it's not...

Dr. Currid: But... deep in the heart of everyone, I think Ecclesiastes... [is] clear on this: that God placed eternity in everyone's heart, in the sense of, *There's more than that, and what is it?* And what most unbelievers do is they put a stop to that type of thinking, even though it's in there. I think deep in their hearts, they... know this can't be all there is. And... that's where we move in and say, "But it's not all there is."

Julia: ... You can just tell from the way they talk... and they[say] “love,” or “peace,” ... you can tell they have that longing for something to be just right, but they don’t know...

Dr. Currid: ... And what is it? What’s going to fill that void? ... Even look at... all this Harvey Weinstein stuff... the “Me too” movement... That’s their answer. And you[say]... “This is just sin,” and what do we do with that? ... All of us not only have sin, but... what comes with it is guilt, and shame... How do we deal with that? ... How does a person deal with that?

Julia: ... I guess that’s why they try [to] do good things. But then the people who are... completely... I was just reading a blog... I think, from a lady who was writing about... [something that happened] at an abortion clinic... during The March for Life... This other lady who worked for the abortion clinic... she would try and hit [protestors] with her car. She would tell them all these terrible things, and he was telling her... “You’re dead in your trespasses...” And... For someone who’s that sinful, and they don’t... Obviously, I don’t think she [the lady who worked for the abortion clinic] would want to go out and do anything good. How do they deal with that? When they think about it truly... you have to come face to face with it sometime.

Dr. Currid: ... Romans 1—They suppress ... They suppress all of reality, they suppress the truth, and then God gives them over to that... That’s frightening.

Julia: It is very frightening.

Dr. Currid: Right.

Julia: My next question is, do you personally know any believers who came to faith because of their suffering?

Dr. Currid: ... That’s a great question... Yes, I suppose we, in some senses... all do. We come under conviction... A lot of people who come to faith, it’s through hardship. And a lot of people come to the very lowest points of their lives and, not knowing what to do, and it’s that point, often the Lord comes in— ... Sometimes [with] salvation... God uses a carrot; sometimes He uses a two-by-four... And I think a lot of us got the two-by-four... Especially my generation: many were converted in college. That’s not so much the case these days, but back... [then], there were a lot... Because we were confronted with the issues of: “What is life, and who am I; what is God?” And we were living lives that were not good... So, you come to a low point in your life... God has brought you there, and then He brings you out... The Corrie Ten Boom [quote]... “There’s no pit so deep enough that He’s not deeper still.” And... I think many people come to salvation that way. They’re brought to these low points in their lives and they’re not sure who they are. They’re lost. And God says...

Julia: ... Like what you were talking about when they just see... “There’s nothing to this.”

Dr. Currid: Exactly...

Julia: Okay, do you... have an example, or know of anyone that you can...

Dr. Currid: ... Myself is a great example. God brought me to salvation when I was 18. And so high school was— ... I went to a public high school; it was kind of a blur. I was involved in... bad stuff... I don't need to get into that kind of typical story back then. And then going to college and you[think]... “What am I doing with my life? Who am I?” It's different today... people don't ask those questions. I think when they go to college and university now, especially secular university, they're not told to ask those questions. If you ask those questions... you're in trouble, and... you're threatening somebody when you say... “Who am I?” Or “Who are you?”... You don't have freedom to do that anymore... There are plenty examples. I have a friend who is now a professor of theology, but he lived— ... All his life was music, and he... lived a wild life. And his job when he got out of college was... He was a musician for Playboy Bunny Band, and he was saved while he played for the Playboy Bunny Band. And he had a Bible study with the bunnies, and then some of them were being converted...

Julia: That's amazing.

Dr. Currid: So... God can reach anywhere, at any time, to any person... I think we often kind of put Him in a box... “You'll never save that guy or that woman or...”

Julia: Like Saul.

Dr. Currid: ... He can bring us to the lowest point. I think He often does.

Julia: I think even with believers, He— ... I can definitely say in my life... when I haven't— ... You can just tell when you're not right, and God... brings you lower and lower, and then you[think]... “Okay, something needs to change,” and then you realize...

Dr. Currid: I've got to give this over to Him...

Julia: So, maybe it's like that except to a bigger degree for— ...

Dr. Currid: Right, exactly.

Julia: ... On page 54, you wrote that you had a friend who lost his mother in high school. Were you a believer then?

Dr. Currid: No.

Julia: Okay. Did you find that you were suffering, and you were seeking answers as well through that, or... What effect did it have on you? Is there such a thing as— ...

Dr. Currid: It did, and I have also had a good friend who— We played football together in my senior year. I was supposed to be with him and another fellow, and we were going to go out... And for some reason, I got hung up, and I... can't remember why it was. So, my good friend picked up his other friend, and they were killed in a car accident.

Julia: Wow.

Dr. Currid: And... that started me... I spiraled down from that, because I didn't have any answers. So, it was actually working the other way. But I think God was setting me up... I'll never forget going to his funeral... There was an open casket, and I walk up, and he's got his letter jacket on, and he's holding a football... It was devastating... I don't know if you've seen unbelievers at funerals of people they love, but they look like they're in a fog. And they are, because they don't know how to calculate this, or comprehend this, or what's going on here... Those types of things were God trying to get my attention. Now, the other thing is... if you see true believers who die... it's... wholly different... And people who... are believers, and... go to funerals, there's no fog at all.

Julia: ... I recently went to [a funeral] over Christmas break... and... being a believer... there was hope. And [she] was a Christian, but at the same time, I think believers are more pensive than confused...

Dr. Currid: Right...

Julia: I could see an unbeliever... not even knowing what to think, but as a believer, I was more— ... My eyes were... reopened to the reality of death... This lady, I knew her... she [had] cancer. And... I didn't really keep in touch with her... but just the reality that even tomorrow or today I could be dead, and it just really makes you think.

Dr. Currid: ... Solomon says in Ecclesiastes... “In days of prosperity, enjoy; in the days of adversity, consider.” Right?... God... wakes us to that, because I think we can even, as believers, go... numb. And just... go day by day... But He will use these kinds of things to remind us and awaken us. And those are good things that He does that, so you consider...

Julia: So, you would say there is such a thing as “secondary suffering” though: ... when someone else is suffering... Other people are affected?

Dr. Currid: ... Absolutely.

Julia: Okay...

Dr. Currid: And... you can be affected in a number of different ways... It can be negative, but it can be [really] positive as well... I tell in the book, about... A good friend... She died of cancer, and when she was going through it, as I say in the book, she said... “God knew I needed this.” And you[think]... “Wow”... There's a negative to that, because you're going to lose her, but there's a positive to that: to see where her faith really rested. And she knew that God was in control of even that... So... suffering can be good for us... Samuel Johnson said... “The hangman's noose tends to focus the mind.” ... It's true, isn't it?

Julia: [Yes], because when you're living in that constantly, I think... you have to [think about these hard things]. I think in the world, it's so easy—... When life is good, you don't really... need God... You do, but it's hard to focus on coming to Him... But... when you're going

through something: you're praying to God to save your mom's life, to save your life, oh my goodness—...

Dr. Currid: ... What you're getting at is actually quite hard because you're praying for this person who's undergoing suffering—for the suffering to end. That's correct prayer, but we don't know how God's going to end it... I think most people are praying that, in this life, that suffering will end. When, in fact... God may be saying, "No, it's time for you to come home and end the suffering that way." See, suffering never conquers the Christian, because we'll be with Him eternally—where there is no death, there is no pain...