

# To Be a Mother Is a Call to Suffer

by John Piper

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*John Piper emphasizes that motherhood is intrinsically linked to suffering, yet filled with hope through God's sovereignty and purpose.*

**Duration:** 40:42

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:33, Matthew 10:24-31, John 8:32, John 14:6, Romans 8:28

**Topics:** "Gods Sovereignty", "Spiritual Growth"

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## Description

In this sermon, Pastor John Piper addresses the issue of questioning God's sovereignty in the face of tragedy. He shares the heartbreaking story of a widower whose wife and infant daughter were mistakenly shot down by the Peruvian Air Force. Piper emphasizes that God is always working in mysterious ways for the good of his children, even when we cannot understand or see it. He urges listeners to trust in God's plan and reminds them that hardships and trials can ultimately lead to spiritual growth and sanctification.

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## Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from Desiring God Ministries is available at [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org) Turn to Matthew chapter 10, verses 24 through 31. A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master.

It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher, and the slave like his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they malign the members of his household? Therefore, do not fear them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be made known. When I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light, and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim among the housetops.

Do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul, but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a cent, and yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your father? But the very hairs of your head are all numbered, so do not fear. You are more valuable than many sparrows.

Amen. Father in heaven, guard my mouth, and put a watch over the door of my lips, and so incline my heart that I would not hurt this people, but only help. I pray that life would flow from a fountain of truth.

You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free, and so guard me from error. And quicken the hearts and enliven the minds to hear, to see beauty and compelling force in the truth, and to believe, and to receive as a treasure, and to be transformed. I pray that there would be a weight of earnest glory from heaven by the Holy Spirit through the word upon us now for these next few minutes.

And that you would do a saving, purifying, healing, encouraging, strengthening, guiding, reconciling work in Jesus' name. Amen. Five reasons why I'm not preaching on today's text, but have a new one.

Number one, every Mother's Day, I think about my mother's death. 1974, December 16, in a bus accident in Israel. My father sitting beside her, inexplicably not killed.

This year, I'm 55, the exact age that he was when she died, which gives me a whole new sense of empathy. I would miss Noel, a lot. Number two, not getting \$9 million in pledges and getting 6.5 has required that I think and pray and assess and try to read Providence.

We'll figure this out and move forward and feel grateful. I feel profoundly grateful for every dream and every sacrifice in your heart and mine. And I mean that with all my heart.

We ended that midnight meeting on Monday with this little mathematical calculation. Divide 800, give or take a few. Giving units that have pledged towards this into 6.5 million.

And what do you get? You get over \$8,000 per pledge. Now, that doesn't include the kids bricks, but includes every teenager that pledged, every old person on fixed income that pledged, every family that pledged. The average, not for a 10 year pledge, but a two year pledge is \$8,000.

That's unbelievable. So I'm not upset about that. But I've had to think, why is it we set our sights on nine? Why is it we prayed towards nine? Why is it we hope toward nine and God settles in at 6.5? Why is that? That's number two.

Number three, Wednesday night in this room did not go the way I hoped it would go when we voted. And I have had to strengthen my hand with the steadying truth of God's sovereign goodness over our church. Number four, Christianity Today arrived in the mail on Friday.

And the cover story is all about the debate over open theology, openness teaching it's called. And you wonder what that is. I'll quote from the introduction to explain what it is.

A few theologians are now teaching that God doesn't know the future precisely because the future doesn't exist yet. Thus, while God is very good at calculating the odds, He still takes risks, especially in dealing with His free creatures. Now, you know, those of you who've been around, that it's a great sadness to me that the leaders of our college and seminary do not regard this unorthodox teaching as serious enough to exclude from what is being taught as acceptably evangelical by at least one of our faculty at Bethel College and Seminary.

And the reason it's so relevant this morning and so pointed in this moment in our life as a church is because of one very true sentence in that introductory essay in Christianity Today that goes like this. These theological debates have enormous implications for piety and pastoral care, especially for how we respond to the tragedies that invade our lives. That's true.

That's true. Whatever else it is, it's not small. Number five.

And this one put me over the edge at 10 o'clock tomorrow. Yesterday morning, I was fully intending moving into this service. I'm preaching on Romans 7, 14 to 25.

Who is this divided man? I will come back to that. We won't waste those tape labels. But this article in the Tribune from the Washington Post, so cynical about the sovereignty of God in the mouth of a widower, put me over the edge.

So, four weeks ago, in a Cessna 185 float plane flying over the Peruvian jungle, Veronica Bowers, seven-month-old charity in her lap, Kevin Donaldson at the stick, six-year-old Corey, son, husband, Jim, and the Peruvian Air Force mistakes it for a drug plane, opens fire. The pilot's legs are riddled. He puts the plane into an emergency dive.

Bleeding, profusely manages to land the plane on a river. And as it sinks and turns upside down, Jim and Corey pull dead Veronica and charity from the plane, both shot by the same bullet, and float, waiting until the canoes come and pick them up. The memorial service was in Michigan two weeks ago on Friday.

The article was a report on what Jim, the husband, said, and it was cynical to the core, because he affirmed what I'm going to affirm right now. And I'm going to affirm it for all those five reasons. I live by this.

I have no other way to survive in ministry than if what I'm about to say is true. And I say it for mothers especially, because if I had to choose a title for this message, you know what it would be? It's what I told Sam. I said, Sam, at 7.15 this morning, if you can get the tape labels changed, fine.

And he said, well, I'll try. What's the title? And I said, call it, To Be a Mother is a Call to Suffer. It's true at the beginning.

Remember what Jesus said? He was groping for some kind of analogy of pain followed by joy. And what would he reach for, of course? John 16, he says, whenever a woman is in labor, she has pain because her hour has come. But when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy that the child has been born into the world.

And so, to be a mother is a call to suffer. But not just at the beginning, also at the end. Remember what Simeon, the old man Simeon, said to Mary? Behold, this child that you're holding there is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed, and a sword will pierce through your own soul, Mary.

At the beginning, pain. At the end, pain. And in the middle, pain.

When the child goes into missions, or when you take the child into missions, or when the child is just foolish, a wise son makes a glad father, and a foolish son breaks the heart of his mother. Now, to be a mother is more than suffering, but every mother in this room knows it is not less. So that would be my title.

To be a mother is a call to suffer. And here's the question then. Mothers ask it, and all of us ask it.

What am I to do with this? How shall I manage this? How shall I handle this? This frustration, or this disappointment, or this heartache, or this calamity? Shall I go the openness route, the open theology solution? Well, what would that be? What would that sound like? I'll read it to you from one of the most articulate spokesmen. What would that be? Quote, When an individual inflicts pain on another individual, one should not go looking for the purpose of God in the event. Christians frequently speak of the purpose

of God in the midst of tragedy caused by someone else, but this I regard to simply be a piously confused way of thinking.

In other words, God had no particular purpose that Veronica and Charity die and Corey and Jim live. There's no particular purpose in that. That's a piously confused way of thinking.

And everything that Elizabeth Elliot and Steve Saint and Steve Green and Jim Bowers said two weeks ago at that memorial service, and I'll tell you what they said in just a minute, was a piously confused way of thinking and provided no sure ground for comfort for anybody in that room. Is that the way you want to go, mom? Now, as we move to those testimonies, which moved me so deeply because I was so upset at this article that I read that gave the cynical rendering of that testimony. I went online, found the memorial service and read every word of it from every testimony that was given that night.

And you can find it too. So I want to tell you what they really said. But first, I want to tell you, it doesn't matter what they say, nor does it matter what I'm saying right now.

Zero significance, except for one thing. If what we're saying is true. That is what God says.

So before I give you their testimony, let me point to God's testimony. First from Psalm 105, then from the text that Steve read in Matthew 10. So go with me if you have a Bible and you'd like to see it with your own eyes.

To Psalm 105. I love inspired interpretations of inspired stories. I'm not inspired.

I am not infallible. I point the best I can to an inspired and infallible book, which I believe can authenticate itself in the life of every open person who is docile to it. But I'm not it.

And don't ever treat me that way. In Psalm 105, we do have an inspired interpretation of an inspired story. The story is the story of how the Jewish people came to be in Egypt in the first place.

Remember, it was about Joseph. The young son who has the dreams and all of his brothers are going to bow down to him. And they hate him and they can't stand him.

And they're envious of him and jealous. And so they sell him into slavery and he makes his way down there. And then they come some years later and there's a big famine.

And that's how the Jews get to Egypt. And then God rescues them, brings them back to the promised land. This is what this psalm is about.

And I only want two verses to make two points. Verse 16 and 17. Here they are.

He, God, called for a famine upon the land. There's the first interpretation. God summoned, God called for a famine upon the land.

He said, famine, come. He broke the whole staff of bread. Verse 17.

Here's the second interpretation. He sent a man before them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave. Sent, sent.

Notice two things. Number one, God called for a famine. That is, God governs natural calamities.

Famine, come. The governance of God over the world includes the calamities of the world. That's point one.

Verse 16. Verse 17. Point two.

The governance of God over the sinful actions of men. These brothers hated their younger brother. They wanted to get rid of him and to get rid of him with envy and jealousy and spite.

They threw him in a pit and then sold him to the Ishmaelites into slavery. And God calls this His sending. Their sinning becomes God's sending.

That's how sovereign God is over the sins of men. The interpretation had already been given in Genesis 50, verse 20, where Joseph tries to calm his brothers who were all panicked that he was going to kill them. He says to them, as for you, you meant it for evil against me, but God meant it.

Now, stop right there and do not read words in here that are not here. Just let these words stand. God meant it.

It does not say God used it. It says God meant it for good. God meant something.

God had a meaning. God had a design. God had a purpose.

It is not a piously confused way of thinking about the story of Joseph to say, God meant it for good, rather than to say God only played catch-up ball and used it for good. It's not the same. This is more.

This is sovereignty over men. Now, let's finish the verse. God meant it for good in order that He might bring about this present result, namely, to preserve many people alive.

You know what? There's an easier way to preserve people alive. Don't summon the famine. Don't call for a famine.

You want to keep people alive? Don't call for a famine. God Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, is always doing a thousand things in everything that He does, that you know nothing about. You know nothing about them.

You learn two things, five things, three things, twenty things about what you think happened in your life, and then you measure them out, and seventeen of them look negative, and three look positive, and you call God Almighty into account. Whoa. That's dangerous.

That's dangerous. God is always doing a thousand things in everything that He does, that you and I know nothing about, and all of them designed for the good of His children. That is your good, if you'll trust Him.

This is a rock, folks. I have now preached this three times today to about 2,300 people. Never in the last two years have I gotten the kind of tears and comments at the front afterwards in each service.

The people that don't like what I'm saying perhaps leave and don't talk to me, but the people that talk to me, you need to know about these people. They are the people who've lost loved ones. First service, my sister and my brother were killed in a car accident and left two little girls last December.

Thank you. Thank you. Preach it, John.

Preach it. It's the only hope. A missionary, her brother went down.

You know Becky. Her brother went down, killed down in Ecuador. A couple of years ago I did the funeral.

Young 32-year-old dad, Easter, his widow remarried. She said, never, never lose this message, John. Tell the people.

Second service, a single woman came up and said, you know six years ago I heard you talk like this. The week before I had a hysterectomy and knew I'd never have children. And I went in and my anesthesiologist was named Dr. Sovereign.

She smiled, tears running down her face. He said, I'll pray for you. She said, you know what God said to me was, would you find fault with the plan I have for your life because you think you have a better one? Or is my design for you good? The other text is Matthew 10.

I say, I am laboring in this message to put a rock under your feet so that when the winds blow and the floods come, you will not be shaken. You will have a place to go and a strong fiber in your faith. And you will have a means of interpreting what seems so absurd at the moment.

Why you will cry. And I hope that after today you will be able to rest in God's sovereign goodness. Matthew chapter 10, Steve read it.

Let's just read a few of these verses. 28. Do not fear those who kill the body but unable to kill the soul, but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your father. The very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear.

You are of more value than many sparrows. Now notice a couple of things. One.

Jesus knows his missionaries are going to be killed. This does not take Jesus off guard. He says, Don't fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul.

Fear not. You can only be killed. You're going to be killed.

Some of you are going to be killed. This is the deal. If they call the master of the house Beelzebul and strung him up on a cross and you follow him, what do you expect? Easy life? Approval? Secondly, notice.

You don't need to fear when that hostility comes. Why? Because it says, Not a sparrow falls to the ground apart from God. And you are more valuable than the sparrows.

Therefore, what? God guides the flight of the sparrow and God guides the flight of the arrow and the bullet. Now I dare to say that because that's what the husband said. In fact, it is the foundation of every Old Testament testimony that victory belongs to the Lord.

What do you think it means when it says in the Proverbs, The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory belongs to the Lord. What does that mean? It means he guides the flight of the sparrow and he guides the flight of the arrow and the bullet. Now let me let these folks talk for a minute and then we'll close.

Jim Bowers, two weeks ago in Fruitport, Michigan, at Calvary Church in front of twelve hundred people, it's all printed on the web, said, concerning his lost wife and daughter, Most of all, I want to thank my God. He is a sovereign God. I'm finding that out more now.

Could this really be God's plan for Ronnie and charity? God's plan for Corey and me and our family? I'd like to tell you why I believe so and why I'm coming to believe so. And then he gave a long list of circumstances that have flowed from it, led into it, and we're in the midst of it. He said, Ronnie and I, Ronnie and charity were instantly killed by the same bullet.

Would you say that's a stray bullet? And it didn't reach Kevin, the pilot, who was right in front of charity. It stayed in charity. That was a sovereign bullet.

Now that's the sentence that stopped me in reading the paper yesterday. That was quoted in the Tribune, that sentence. And it was quoted with great cynicism.

It was a sovereign bullet. I said, I got to read this. I got to find this.

I got to get the context for this statement. And figure this guy out. Because clearly, Mr. Donaldson, who writes for the Washington Post, thought that was the most absurd, ridiculous, horrible thing one could possibly say at a funeral.

That the bullet that killed my wife was a sovereign, God-directed bullet. Then he forgave the killers, the shooters. Who knows what was going on there? You don't need to know, I guess.

He said, How could I not forgive them when God has forgiven me so much? And then he adds, Those people who did that simply were used by God. Whether you want to believe it or not, he says, I believe it. They were used by Him, by God, to accomplish His purpose so that this, maybe, is similar to the Roman soldiers whom God used to put Christ on the cross.

Steve Saint is the son of Nate Saint, who was killed by the Raudani Indians in Ecuador in 1956. He is 50 years old. He was at the funeral.

He spoke. It's on the web. Do the math.

50. He was 6 when his dad was killed. Corey's age.

He comes to the pulpit. He looks down at this little boy and says, Corey, my name is Steve. You know what? A long time ago, when I was just about your size, I was at a meeting just like this.

I was sitting down there and I really didn't know completely what was going on. But, you know, now I understand it better. A lot of adults used a word I didn't understand then.

They used a word called tragedy. But, you know, now I'm kind of an old guy, and now when people come to me and they say, Oh, I remember that tragedy when it happened so long ago. I know, Corey, they were wrong.

You see, my dad, who was a pilot like the man you probably call Uncle Kevin, and four of his really good friends had just been buried in the jungles. And my mom told me my dad was never coming home. And my mom wasn't really sad, so I asked her, Where did dad go? And she said, He went to live with Jesus.

And, you know, that's where my mom and dad had told me that we all wanted to go and live. Well, I thought, Isn't it great that daddy got to go sooner than the rest of us? And you know what? Now, when people say that was a tragedy, I know they were wrong. And then he looked up from this little boy to the 1,200 adults, and he told them the difference between the unbelieving world and the followers of Jesus.

This is what he said, For them, the pain is fundamental and the joy is superficial because it won't last. For us, the pain is superficial and the joy is fundamental. Amen, Steve.

Thank you. Amen. He said it more than once about his own dad.

I close with Elizabeth Elliot. She wasn't there. She made a recording.

And I'll pass over her comments, which are, as you can imagine, strong and to the point, as we've been saying. But I'll read the poem that she quoted by Martha Nicholson as we close. And it doesn't get much better than this theologically and faithfully to Scripture in poetry.

The word mendicant means beggar. I stood a mendicant of God before His royal throne and begged Him for one priceless gift, which I could call my own. I took the gift from out His hand, but as I would depart, I cried, But Lord, this is a thorn and it has pierced my heart.

This is a strange and hurtful gift which thou has given me. He said, My child, I give good gifts and gave my best to thee. I took it home.

And though at first the cruel thorn hurt sore, As long years passed, I learned at last to love it more and more. I learned He never gives a thorn without this added grace. He takes the thorn to pin aside the veil which hides His face.

I cannot come close to improving on those last two lines. To link this sermon with the last five sermons in Romans 7. I learned He never gives a thorn without this added grace. He takes the thorn to pin aside the veil which hides His face.

It isn't law keeping that justifies us. It isn't first law keeping that sanctifies us. What is it we found in 2 Corinthians chapter 3 verse 17 and 18? It is by grace the lifting of the veil so that we see the glory of Christ crucified on our behalf.

Risen for our justification, reigning over the world on our behalf. Interceding for us all authority under His power. Working all things together for our good and we receive it as the treasure of our lives.

And are shaped from one degree of glory into His image. That is how we become sanctified. And therefore, if this is true, this poem, the words of Steve Saint, the words of Jim Bowers, the words of Jesus in Matthew, the words of the psalmist in Psalm 105, my testimony from my mother's death and all the hardships that my life brings me, little ones or bigger ones, if all of these testimonies are true, I say, if it takes a thorn, if it takes a disappointment, a frustration, a setback, a heartache, a calamity, if it takes that to pin the veil up so that I can see Jesus, bring it on.

Bring it on. Let's pray. Oh God, it's a dangerous prayer.

It's a dangerous prayer. But that's how much we want You. We want to see You compellingly, beautifully, ravishingly, attractively as our treasure.

The satisfaction of our souls. The fulfillment of our minds. The end of all our dreams.

Our righteousness before God. Our hope for everlasting life. Infinite joy ever increasing.

Oh God, teach this people that joy is fundamental and suffering is superficial. In the end. Moms, we love you.

To be a mother is a call to suffer. Every mom in the room knows it. You know it is that.

It is not only that. There will be great and wonderful moments, but it is at least that. I hope that you have a very, very sweet, deep, powerful, appreciated day.

You're dismissed. We invite you to visit Desiring God online at [www.DesiringGod.org](http://www.DesiringGod.org). There you'll find hundreds of sermons, articles, radio broadcasts, and much more. All available to you at no charge.

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