

“Why Does God Allow Suffering?”

Tough Questions, part #1

Job 1:6-22

You are in the right place this morning. You are not here by accident. The Lord God, who formed you and gave you life, sees you here, right now, and he wants you to experience his love. Look around you for a moment. In this room you will find people who love Jesus and worship God. We are not perfect. We are broken people, just like everyone else in this world. However, we have found forgiveness and healing. This is the Body of Christ, the church. And today, you are a part of it.

Would you please join me in prayer? “Holy Spirit, thank you for your love and intercession for us. Thank you for your awesome presence to lift us up when we are weak, and to guide us to follow your call. We simply ask that you open our ears to hear, our eyes to see, and our hearts to respond to what you are doing in our lives and in our world. Speak to us your word in this moment now, and we will be filled. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.”

A woman came to my office a while ago. She needed someone to talk to because her life was falling apart. The details do not matter, but suffice to say, her children were in trouble, her husband was in trouble, and she was deeply anxious. As we sat and talked, I asked her why she thought these things were happening. “I don’t know why,” she answered. “In all the accusations that have come against us, we have always maintained our innocence.”

This was a bible-believing, church-attending, Jesus-loving family, and I had precious little advice to give her. I only maintained that God is faithful, and that we could pray that the reason behind their suffering would be revealed. But a

small voice inside me wondered, “What if they never find out why they are suffering?”

We all experience suffering in life, in one form or another. And when tragedy hits, we want answers. Think for a moment when you last experienced deep stress and anxiety. What was happening? For many, the hurricanes in the last few weeks have been deeply disturbing. How could God allow such terrible forces of destruction in nature? For others, it is physical illness, even death in the family. For many, the pain of loss, dysfunction and anger in families, unemployment and so on, leave us on our knees in weakness, crying out to God in heaven, “Why is this happening to me?” In response to our questions, God gives us the book of Job.

Job is one of the oldest books of the Bible. Some scholars think as old as Genesis itself. I want to tell you today how I understand this book, and it’s OK if you disagree with me. In my opinion, Job is not a historical book, such as Kings and Chronicles, but rather, Job is an elaborate story-poem, written to help us wrestle with a question that has bothered us for centuries. Why do righteous people suffer?

The story starts out with a description of Job’s good life. He worships God, takes care of his family and his household, and, of course, is fabulously wealthy. The Bible makes it clear, though, that Job has not let his wealth affect his integrity. Despite his lofty place in life, he is a humble man.

The scene switches to heaven, where God has a conversation with Satan. Understand, the word “Satan” in this scripture is the word “Accuser.” Satan’s job, apparently, is to find humans and accuse them of wrongdoing. In the beginning of this story, God actually is the first one to bring Job into the conversation. God

is proud of Job. Job is an outstanding example of what God calls a “blameless and upright” man. (Job 1:8) Satan immediately offers a challenge to God. Satan accuses God of codling Job. Satan wagers that if God takes away Job’s protection and possessions, Job will curse God to his face. God allows Satan to torment Job. God himself does not afflict Job; God gives Satan the authority to do so, with limits.

So as we read on, an almost comical series of events happens. Job’s cattle are stolen, and a servant says, “I am the only one who has escaped to tell you.” Another servant reports that the sheep were all struck by “fire from heaven” and incinerated, and reports, “I am the only one who has escaped to tell you.” The camels are stolen, servants murdered, and finally the roof collapses on Job’s children. Each time, a servant reports, “and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you.”

That is some really bad stuff. Losing your possessions is one thing, and I am certain Job did not have insurance. But to lose your family; specifically, as a parent, to lose all your children, would be incredibly hard to bear. More than one person in our congregation has lost a child. You know Job’s story, because you have experienced it yourself.

Job feels this pain. Look at the last verses in the chapter. (1:20) “At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head.” To tear your clothes and shave your head was the ultimate gesture of mourning. Job was in deep anguish.

And then this happened (verse 21):

“Then he fell to the ground in worship and said:

*“Naked I came from my mother’s womb,
and naked I will depart.*

*The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;
may the name of the Lord be praised.”*

Wow. What a response. We like to sing those words on Sunday morning when we are happy, but I doubt very much I would feel like singing praises to God when members of my family suddenly passed away. It just seems strange.

You are encouraged to read the next forty chapters yourself, but let me give you the abbreviated summary. God brags on Job again. Satan asks for another try, this time inflicting Job with painful sores. Even Job’s wife says, “Curse God and die.” (2:9) To which Job replies, “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” Job still refuses to sin.

Eventually, Job’s three friends show up to comfort him, and they have a long conversation, during which Job’s friends accuse him of sinning and bringing this punishment on himself. Job fiercely maintains his innocence. Job cries out to God for a response, and finally, God answers Job, although his answers are cryptic. In the last chapter, Job’s health and possessions are restored, he has more children, and the story ends.

Honestly, the book of Job does not do a great job of satisfying our question, “Why?” In reality, the book of Job is there to help us determine if God even cares about our suffering. Job really wants to know, “God, do you even notice me?” The answer is, emphatically, “Yes.”

God always notices what is happening to his children. God notices, and God cares, about our well-being. However, Job points out an important fact – suffering is temporary. It affects temporary things. As precious as possessions and health and family are, none of them are eternal. Only our relationship with God is eternal. Worshiping God is a choice Job makes. He does not pretend the

suffering did not happen. He shaves his head. He peppers God with questions. God answers Job, but not in the way Job expected. Even so, Job still trusts God. That trust determines his actions, as opposed to letting life's circumstances determine if he will trust God.

Job's friends insist that Job is a sinner. They are partially correct. The Bible tells us that we are all sinners. (See Romans 3:23, for example) None of us are righteous compared to God. But these friends are incorrect to think that Job sinned against God and brought this all on himself. The opposite is true. Because of Job's faithfulness, Satan went after him. The truth is, if we align ourselves with God, Satan sees a bullseye on our chests. Consider the fact that God's boasting is what causes Job trouble. The way the story is written, Satan would have never attacked if God hadn't spoken up.

When a person is suffering, they may ask, “Why is this happening to me?” But if that was the real question, then when the oncologist tells us what is happening in our cells and lymph nodes, we would be satisfied. When the police officer, weatherman, doctor, lawyer, mother, father, or even pastor gives us the logical explanation, we would be satisfied. But we are not.

What we really want to know is, “Will I survive this suffering? Will I find peace, not matter what the outcome is?” That's what we are really asking.

What if, the reason we suffer is not the result of sin, corruption, or illness? What if the reason we suffer is because there is an epic battle going on between God and Satan, good versus evil? What if our small piece of suffering is actually part of a larger conflict that spans history? What if we really want to know, “God, are you really in control? I don't feel like you are.”?

If that is how we view suffering, then Job makes sense. God does not answer Job’s question directly. God does not tell Job about his deal with the devil. God does not say, “The devil made me do it!” God says, “I am in control. I have been. I will always be. If you don’t believe me, just look at the universe around you. I created it. I created you.”

The call of the Christian is to say, in the face of suffering, “Yes, it hurts, but God is in control. Yes, it is painful, but I will still worship God. I do not like my suffering. I wish this was not my reality, BUT (there is always a big ‘but’) God wins in the end.”

Isn’t that the message of the cross? Wasn’t that the worst day in history, when the Son of the Living God died?! And yet, was not Sunday morning, at the tomb, the craziest and the best story in history? Victory in Jesus, indeed!

Christians are suffering just like the rest of the world. We are not immune. However, we have an eternal hope, that no matter what we face in this life, God wins. Love wins. Christ wins. (SING) We shall overcome. We shall overcome. We shall overcome, some day. Deep in my heart, I still believe. We shall overcome someday.

Hebrews 12:3-4 tell us to “fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Philippians 2:6-9 say that Jesus,
“being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—

even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.”

You might not believe it now, but your pain has a purpose. Maybe it will give you empathy with someone who faces the same ordeal later on. Maybe it will be your opportunity to give God glory, to fight the good fight of the faith, even as your world is falling apart. Maybe your suffering is not for a good reason, but you can choose to have hope, even as Job did. You can say, with the same confidence, (Job 19:23-25)

“I know that my redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand on the earth.
And after my skin has been destroyed,
yet in my flesh I will see God;
I myself will see him
with my own eyes—I, and not another.
How my heart yearns within me!

Let me conclude with a promise from Jesus Christ himself, found in John 16:33. “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” Take heart, my friends. Take heart. Amen.

Memory verse

“...We know that suffering produces perseverance, character, and hope. And hope does not put us to shame...” Romans 5:3-5

Reflection questions

1. When have you suffered for no apparent (good) reason? How did you endure that suffering?
2. Have you ever thought that God has treated you unfairly? Have you ever blamed God for your circumstances? Why or why not?
3. Which part of Job’s story connects best to yours?
4. How can God provide healing, if not answers, to your suffering?
5. How can God use your experience to minister to someone else?
6. Who is suffering right now around you? Will you pray for them? Help them?