

“Why Does God Allow Suffering?”

Tough Questions, part #1

Job 1:6-22

[Title slide] 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. 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.”

[women crying] A woman once came to my office to see me. She needed someone to talk to because her life was falling apart. I don’t even remember all the details, 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?”

[flood victims] We all experience suffering in life, and when we do, we want answers. When did you last experienced extreme stress and anxiety? What was happening? For many, the wars in Gaza and Ukraine are deeply disturbing.

How could God allow kidnapping, bombing, and starvation? Why do we experience illness and death in our own families? Why do sporadic tornadoes, hurricanes, and tsunamis cause such horrific destruction? Dysfunction, unemployment, racism and violence leave us on our knees, crying out to God, “Why is this happening?”

I don’t know. Yet I find hope in the fact that God has given us Job.

[Job and family] Job is one of the oldest books of the Bible, possibly as old as Genesis. Job is an elaborate story-poem, written to help us wrestle with a question that has bothered humanity from the beginning. Why do righteous people suffer?

That’s a good question. I don’t know the answer. In fact, anyone who has the audacity to try to explain human suffering once and for all is probably not someone I would even trust. Yet, I do have some ideas based on Job, and I pray you’d consider them.

The Bible says Job was a good, righteous man. He worshipped God, and took care of his household. He was also fabulously wealthy. The Bible makes it clear, though, that Job did not let his wealth affect his integrity. Despite his lofty place in life, he was a humble man.

In chapter one, God has a conversation with Satan, the “Accuser.” Satan’s job is to find humans and accuse them of wrongdoing. God actually is the first one to mention Job. God is proud of Job. Job is an outstanding example of what God calls a “blameless and upright” man. (Job 1:8)

Satan accuses God of codling Job. Satan wagers that if God takes away Job’s protection and possessions, Job will curse God. So God allows Satan to torment Job. God himself does not afflict Job; God gives Satan permission to do so, with limits.

[servants report to Job] Next, an almost comical series of events happens. Job’s cattle are stolen, his sheep are all struck by “fire from heaven,” and his camels are carried off. Then his are servants murdered. Finally, the roof collapses on Job’s children. Each time a devastating incident occurs, there is only one servant to come back and report, “and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you.”

What a disaster. Losing your possessions is one thing; Job did not have insurance for his camels. But to lose your family – specifically, as a parent, to lose all your children – that would be incredibly hard to bear. I know parents who lost a child. They know Job’s story, because they have experienced it themselves.

Job feels this pain. Verse 1:20 says, “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.”

What a response. We could 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.

After this, 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.

[Job and three friends] 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 (ironically) out of a tornado, although God’s answers seem cryptic and abstract. In the last chapter, Job’s health and possessions are restored, he has more children, and the story ends.

Job does not do a great job of satisfying our question, “Why?” That is sort of a knee-jerk, superficial question, in my opinion. Job pushes us deeper. In reality, we are asking if God even cares about our suffering. Like Job, we really want to know, “God, do you even notice me? Do you love 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.

[Job kneeling] Worshiping God is a choice Job makes. Job does not ignore the suffering; he shaves his head and peppers God with questions. God answers Job, but not in the way Job expected. Even so, Job still trusts God. That trust determines Job’s 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. (Romans 3:23) 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. After all, God’s boasting caused Job’s trouble. Satan might have never attacked if God hadn’t spoken up.

[doctor and patient] When we suffer, we may ask, “Why is this happening to me?” But if that were the real question, then when the oncologist explains about our cells and lymph nodes, we would be satisfied. When the police officer, weatherman, doctor, lawyer, mother, father, or even pastor gives us a logical explanation, we would be satisfied. But we are not.

What we really want to know is, “Am I alone? Will I find peace, no matter the outcome? Does anyone even care?” That’s what we are really asking.

[heavenly battle] What if the reason we suffer is not sin, corruption, illness, or even bad weather? 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 just want to know, “God, are you in control?”

If that is how we view suffering, then Job can help. God does not need to answer Job’s question directly. God does not need to tell Job about his deal with

the devil. God simply says, “I am in control; I have been; I will always be. Look at the universe around you. I created it. I created you. We will get through this.”

[Cross, Jesus] 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 in the end, God’s love wins.”

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, wasn’t the best day in all history Easter Sunday, when the tomb was empty? Yes! Jesus is alive!

Christians are not immune to suffering. However, we have hope, no matter what we face in this life, God wins. Love wins. Christ wins. We can sing the hymn, “We shall overcome. We shall overcome. We shall overcome, some day. Deep in my heart, I still believe. We shall overcome someday.”

It’s not just Job that gives us a heavenly perspective. Here are two other examples from scripture.

[scripture] Hebrews 12:2-3:

“Fix your 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.”

[scripture] Philippians 2:6-9:

Jesus, “being found in appearance as a man,
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 yet, but your pain has a purpose. Maybe it will give you empathy and compassion for someone else later. 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,

[scripture] “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!” (Job 19:23-25)

[title] Jesus Christ said in John 16:33, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” Take heart, friends. Take heart. The pain and suffering we see and experience are not God’s will, but that will stop neither God nor those who love him. It is a leap of faith to worship God in the midst of our lament. And that is what Job, and many others, have chosen to do. So can we.

Let’s pray.

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 or comfort, 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? Will you help them?