

Job and the Dilemma of Suffering

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God does not give us the answer to why we go through suffering, but He does give us Himself.

To live is to suffer. The question is not *if* we will suffer but how we will respond to suffering *when* it happens. Will we suffer *toward* God (allow our suffering to drive us to Him), or will we suffer *away from* God (allow our suffering to hinder our relationship with Him)?

In the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, we find the story of Job—the classic story on pain and suffering. Even many people unfamiliar with the Bible know the basics of Job’s story, how everything was taken from him and how he remained devoted to God. The New Testament lifts up Job as one of our examples of patience and endurance (Jas. 5:10-11). Job suffered *toward* God and found that suffering gave him a greater understanding of God and His ways.



Voices from Church History

“The picture of God in the Bible is of One who suffers, and when the mask is torn off life and we see all its profound and vast misery, the suffering, sorrowing God is the only One who does not mock us.”¹

—Oswald Chambers
(1874-1917)



When have you asked questions about the trials in your life? Do you think it’s wrong for a Christian to ask these kinds of questions? Why or why not?

In this session, we will look at the dilemma of suffering in the life of Job. The story of Job confronts us with the question “Why do good people suffer?” And the story offers us insight into right and wrong ways to pursue the answer to this question. The suffering of Job points us forward to the ultimate answer to the problem of evil—the redemptive suffering of Jesus Christ and the promise of a world made new. And as Jesus’ followers, we seek to alleviate suffering as we walk alongside others.

1. Job’s dilemma: Why do good people suffer? (Job 1:6-12,20-22)

⁶ Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. ⁷ The LORD said to Satan, “From where have you come?” Satan answered the LORD and said, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” ⁸ And the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?” ⁹ Then Satan answered the LORD and said, “Does Job fear God for no reason? ¹⁰ Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. ¹¹ But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” ¹² And the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.” So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.

After this scene, we read that Job lost everything: his oxen, donkeys, sheep, camels, servants, and even his sons and daughters (1:16-19). After all this, what did Job do?

²⁰ Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. ²¹ And he said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”

²² In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.



Based on Job’s response in 1:20-22, how would you describe Job’s character?

The story of Job is an example of *very* bad things happening to a *very* righteous man. You may never have faced all the tragedies that Job faced. And you may not be as upright as he was. But you probably know something of suffering and how it feels like the world is coming to an end. Job's story does not answer the question of why good people suffer. But it does offer us some direction. Here are three things to keep in mind:

Job did not suffer because God was angry with him.

One of the greatest temptations for Christians is to think that suffering is a sign that God is angry with us. *God is paying me back*, we think. But Job's story reminds us that God's anger is not why we suffer (see v. 8).

Furthermore, we know that on the cross, Jesus took the penalty for all our sins. He absorbed the wrath of God for us (1 John 2:2). Granted, God disciplines us. But the author of Hebrews reminds us that "God is treating you as sons" (Heb. 12:7). We aren't treated as enemies of God but as sons and daughters of God. He disciplines us because He loves us (Heb. 12:5-7; cf. Prov. 3:11-12). This is the reason God brought up Job to Satan. God was pleased with Job.

Job did not suffer because he had sinned.

When we suffer, we often think of particular sins we've committed or ways we've faltered in our obedience. We believe that we are getting what we deserve. Usually our minds go to that one sin that we cannot seem to overcome, and we blame that sin for our suffering. Our theology too often goes like this: *Do good, be blessed. Do wrong, be cursed.*

But Job's story shows us something different (see Job 1:1,22). The righteous *do* suffer. The apostle Paul suffered deeply during his ministry but said it was a source of deep joy for him (Col. 1:24-25). One look at the life of Jesus should quickly remind us that suffering and sin aren't always connected. Throughout His life, He was mocked, ridiculed, and rejected, even though He was completely sinless.

 **Voices from the Church**

"What is called for today is a growing core of Christians not who have martyr complexes but whose daily lives are lived in such winsome, habitual, and cheerful self-sacrifice that they can weather even adverse circumstances with God-glorifying wisdom and grace."²

—Robert Yarbrough

Job suffered in order to reveal his faith.

When the Bible talks about suffering, it often uses the imagery of a furnace (1 Pet. 4:12). Gold, silver, and precious metals were put through fire in order to burn away any dross or impurities. God does this with our faith as well. He puts us through the furnace of suffering and trials in order to better reveal our faith. He is removing all the things that hinder our faith and showing us that He is really all that we need. He is helping us trust Him more and more and trust the world and ourselves less and less. It is because we trust Him that He brings trials our way so that our faith is revealed as genuine and mature.



Think back to a season of suffering in your own life. Did God use that suffering to lead you into a different kind of relationship with Him? How so?



Why might suffering be an effective means of spiritual growth (see Jas. 1:2-4)?

2. Job responds to his friends' wrong answers (Job 16:1-5,18-22).

After Job's life came unraveled, his friends showed up on the scene to offer counsel and comfort. Unfortunately, his friends gave answers that angered God and proved unhelpful to Job. Look at Job's response to their wrong advice.

¹ Then Job answered and said:

² "I have heard many such things; miserable comforters are you all.

³ Shall windy words have an end? Or what provokes you that you answer?

⁴ I also could speak as you do, if you were in my place;

I could join words together against you and shake my head at you.

*⁵ I could strengthen you with my mouth,
and the solace of my lips would assuage your pain.*

.....
*18 "O earth, cover not my blood,
and let my cry find no resting place.*

*19 Even now, behold, my witness
is in heaven, and he who testifies
for me is on high.*

*20 My friends scorn me;
my eye pours out tears to God,*

*21 that he would argue the case
of a man with God,
as a son of man does
with his neighbor.*

*22 For when a few years have come
I shall go the way from which I shall not return.*



This story shows us how vital good friendships are to our lives. We need to suffer in community. We need good friends to surround us during our suffering, not like the miserable comforters who came to Job. We need friends who will carry the load with us and walk with us through the storms we are weathering.

? What are some overused clichés or phrases that Christians tend to use during times of suffering?

? Why should we avoid being quick to give easy answers?


The Book of Proverbs shows us over and over again the importance of good friendships (Prov. 17:17; 18:1,24; 27:6,17). In order to have these kinds of friends, we must do two things, and we get clues from Job. First, we need to *be* these kinds of friends. Job said he would do the opposite of his friends. He would actually try to help (Job 16:5). We must model true friendship if we are going to have true friends.

The second thing we must do to have good friendships is look to the true Friend. Job said he wished “that [his witness in heaven] would argue the case of a man with God, as a son of man does with his neighbor” (v. 21). If Job only knew then what we know now! We know there is One who stands between God and man and pleads for us as a man pleads for his friends. Jesus Christ is that man; He is that friend. He said, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). We need Him.

Voices from the Church

“God’s work of change has relationships at the core. They are a necessary means and a wonderful goal. Humble community is not the icing on the cake of the Christian life. In a real way, it is the cake.”³

—Timothy Lane
and Paul David Tripp

 What are some ways your friends have encouraged you during your suffering?

3. God responds to Job and his friends (Job 40:1-5; 42:7-9).

Why me? What is God doing right now? What did I do to cause this? Why does suffering come to those who love God? How could a loving God allow this to happen? When we suffer, these are legitimate questions. They need good and thoughtful answers. But what we learn from Job is that what we need most in times of suffering is God.

¹ *And the LORD said to Job:*

² *“Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?
He who argues with God, let him answer it.”*

³ *Then Job answered the LORD and said:*

⁴ *“Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you?
I lay my hand on my mouth.*

⁵ *I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further.”*

.....
42:7 After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: “My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. ⁸ Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves. And my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.”⁹ So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the LORD had told them, and the LORD accepted Job’s prayer.

What a wonderful ending to Job’s story! Job received an even grander vision of God’s power and goodness through his suffering. He was reminded that no one can put God in the dock and bring accusations against Him. Job saw just how small he was in comparison to the vastness of God’s glory. What’s more, Job saw an even deeper level of God’s goodness. The Lord accepted his prayer on behalf of his friends and removed His anger from them.



Why might a greater understanding of the power and character of God be what all of us in pain really need?

We learn two important truths about God from Job in regard to suffering and trials:

God is God and we are not.

Suffering, if nothing else, reminds us that we are not God. It reminds us that our lives are not in our control. David said, “My times are in your hand” (Ps. 31:15). God is the One who directs our paths and determines our days. In our Western, consumerist society, we are accustomed to planning our own way most of the time, but often the Lord brings things into our lives that remind us that He is God and we are not. Job understood this well.

God comes near in our suffering.

God made Himself known to Job. And our God comes close to us. The greatest example of this is the death and resurrection of Jesus. God gave His own Son who suffered for us, in our place. His suffering reminds us that we never suffer alone and that one day He will put an end to all suffering. This is our great hope, and this is our great message to the world.



In what ways have you been reminded that God is God and you are not?



How has God come near to you during your suffering?

Conclusion

Job's journey is both difficult and beautiful. It is difficult because we see just how deeply he suffered and what he endured. But Job's story is also beautiful. The way God came to his aid, revealed Himself, and eventually restored Job gives us hope and courage. We are reminded that God will not leave us or forsake us. He will even give us His own Son to remind us He wants the best for His people.

CHRIST CONNECTION: In his time of suffering, Job yearned for a mediator—someone to stand between him and God. Jesus is the mediator who suffered, even though He had never sinned, in order to pay the price for human sin and to put an end to suffering on earth.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

31. *The Problem of Evil*

Many atheists have argued that if God is all-powerful, all-loving, and knows everything, then evil would not exist in the world as humans know it today. But because evil exists in the world, God must not exist (or if He does exist, then He is not good or all-powerful). Despite its powerful rhetoric, appealing to evil as an argument against God fails: first, because outrage over bad things in this world presupposes a “good” moral standard that does not exist apart from God, and second, because God could have a good reason (though unknown to us) for allowing evil and suffering to continue for a season. Given what we know about God's character and purposes, Christians can rest assured that even in the midst of evil, God is working all things for our good (Rom. 8:28).

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to comfort people going through a time of suffering, not by answering every question but by assuring them of God's great love.

1. How can our attitude and faith in the midst of suffering give people a reason to consider the gospel in their own lives?

2. How has your friendship with God through Jesus Christ helped prepare you to provide comfort to others?

3. What are some specific ways we can provide comfort for those who are suffering in our group, church, or community?

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