

When God's People Suffer: God and Suffering

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[0 : 0 0] gets no answer. Instead, he has three friends, or so-called friends, who over the course of about 25 chapters give him all kinds of wrong advice. Mostly they say it's because of your sin that you're suffering, which is absolutely wrong. Job was innocent, so they have no answer.

And in the section we're going to look at today, there's another friend by the name of Elihu, who has some helpful things to say, but he's not entirely correct either. But they are helpful nonetheless. So turn to Job 32, we'll pray, and then we'll get stuck in.

Father, our desire is that we would hear you speak to us through your word, through a very old book such as Job. But yet it speaks with absolute relevance to us today, as we face suffering, as we encounter it. We need your help. We need the power of your Holy Spirit to speak into our lives, to bring your words to life, to bring your comfort, and to bring your hope. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, I'm going to start with a question. And it's simply this. If I were God, I would... dot, dot, dot. You fill in the blank. If I were God, I would end all the pain? Get rid of world poverty?

[1 : 4 7] If I were God, I would correct all injustice? Stop innocent people from suffering?

Stop the Titanic from sinking? What would you do? Well, here's Job's problem. He recognises that God is God, that God is the creator and the sustainer of this entire universe. Job knows that God has absolute power and supreme authority, but yet it seems that God is doing nothing to stop all the suffering. In fact, Job has reached the conclusion that God is unfair and unjust.

Let me just read to you some of the comments he makes earlier on. He says, As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice, the Almighty who has made me taste bitterness of soul, I will never admit that you are in the right till I die. I will not deny my integrity.

In other words, God is on trial. If it were up to Job, Job would have God resign from his position, and he would give the control of the world to somebody else who could run it much better.

And I don't think we're any different. We experience and we encounter suffering in all kinds of different ways, and we say that if I were God, I would never do that. If I were God, I would not let innocent people suffer.

[3 : 4 0] So is God guilty? Is it true that God is unjust and unfair? Well, before God actually answers Job, and that's what we'll be looking at next week, it's an exciting section of the book, another of Job's friends is introduced to us in chapter 32, verse 2, let's read there.

But Elihu, son of Barachel, the Buzite of the family of Ram, so he's a man of some standing, became very angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God.

Now Elihu is angry with Job because in Job's claim to be innocent and blameless, Job is accusing God of being guilty. Job is not just putting God on trial, he is charging God with gross negligence and injustice.

Now that's a serious accusation against the Creator and the ruler of the world. So is Job right in what he is saying?

Well, from chapters 33 through to 37, Elihu responds with wise counsel to Job's charges against God.

[5 : 08] And although Elihu is angry, he's not like the other three friends because he speaks with love, understanding and compassion. But now, Job, listen to my words.

Pay attention to everything I say. I'm about to open my mouth. My words are on the tip of my tongue. My words come from an upright heart.

My lips sincerely speak what I know. So they are wise, they are comforting words.

So let's listen to what he has to say. First, Job's first charge is this, that God does not listen.

Elihu summarizes Job's issue with God in chapter 33, verse 8. So here's Elihu speaking to Job. He says, But you have said in my hearing, I heard your very words, Job.

[6 : 22] And he quotes Job, verse 9. I am pure and without sin. I am clean and free from guilt. Yet God has found fault with me.

He considers me his enemy. Now, Job is claiming his innocence. He has proved his blameless life all the way through chapter 31. But it seems that God has not listened.

Job is still being seen as an enemy. Well, God does listen. And in response, he does speak, verse 13. Elihu says to Job, Why do you complain to God that he answers none of man's words?

For God does speak, Now one way and now another, Though man may not perceive it. The reality is God does hear all of our complaints, And in response, he does speak to us.

He speaks, verse 15, In a dream, in a vision of the night, When deep sleep falls on men, And they slumber in their beds. Sometimes, though, God speaks even through our suffering.

[7 : 32] Verse 19, Or a man may be chastened on a bed of pain With constant distress in his bones. Verse 21, So his flesh wastes away to nothing, And his bones once hidden, Now stick out, His soul draws near to the pit, And his life to the messengers of death.

Sometimes, he's saying, God speaks to us through our suffering. And if that's how he chooses to speak, How should we respond?

Verse 26, The man who is suffering, He says he prays to God, And he finds favour with him. He sees God's face, And he shouts for joy.

He's restored by God to his righteous state. Then he comes to men, And he says, You know what? I have sinned, And perverted what was right.

But I did not get what I deserved. He redeemed my soul from going down to the pit, And I shall live to enjoy the light. C.S. Lewis, Most famous for his series of Narnia, Also wrote a book called The Problem of Pain.

[8 : 45] And here he comments on God speaking to us through suffering. This is what he says from his book. He says, We can rest contentedly in our sins, But pain insists upon being attended to.

God whispers to us in our pleasures, He speaks in our conscience, But shouts in our pains. It is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

Sometimes God speaks through our suffering To bring about repentance and restoration. Sometimes that is true. Sometimes our pain is God speaking to us To awaken us to our sinful behaviour And to put things right.

So God does hear. God does listen. And God does speak. But the problem with this is that This is not an answer for Job, Because Job is blameless and innocent.

Job is suffering because, Well, we don't know, It's not because of sin. So God is still definitely on trial.

[10 : 09] Job's second charge is this, That God is unfair or unjust. In chapter 34, Elihu summarises again Job's problem with God, Verse 5.

Job says, I am innocent, But God denies me justice. Although I am right, I am considered a liar. Although I am guiltless, His arrow inflicts an incurable wound.

Job has proven his innocence. He has been just and fair with people. But God, it seems, Is unjust and unfair.

It reminded me of a little book I was reading By Elie Wiesel. Quoted it before. A young teenager, He endured the brutality of Auschwitz, The concentration camps.

As a young boy of 14, He watched his mother and sister Being taken off to the crematorium To be burned. He stood by as his father Was helplessly being beaten.

[11 : 17] And as he looked out on all of this suffering, As a devout Jewish boy, This is what he said, Some men spoke of God, His mysterious ways, The sins of the Jewish people, The redemption to come.

As for me, I had ceased to pray. I concurred with Job. I was not denying God's existence, But I doubted his absolute justice.

We all think God is unfair and unjust at times. But, says Elie Hugh, God is fair.

God is just. Chapter 34, verse 10. So listen to me, You people of understanding. Far be it from God to do evil, From the Almighty to do wrong.

He repays a man for what he has done. He brings upon him what his conduct deserves. It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, That the Almighty would pervert justice.

[12 : 26] And in case you think God is blind to how he deals with people, Look at verse 18. Is he not the one who says to kings, You are worthless, And to nobles, You are wicked?

He shows no partiality to princes, And does not favour the rich over the poor. For they are all the work of his hands. Verse 21, His eyes are on the ways of men.

He sees their every step. There is no dark place, No deep shadow where evildoers can hide. God is just and fair.

He sees everything that happens, And it does not go unnoticed. In fact, the truth is, God is not only fair, He treats us with grace and mercy.

Verse 31, Suppose a man says to God, I am guilty, But will offend no more.

[13 : 30] Teach me what I cannot see. If I have done anything wrong, I will not do so again. Have you ever said anything like that? I promise you God, That I am never going to do that again.

This time, I am going to change my attitude. It won't happen. I promise. Verse 33, Should God then reward you on your terms When you refuse to repent?

You see, Even though we make promises to be better people, We all know that the next day We'll fail and fall and mess up In exactly the same place again. But yet God does not give us what we deserve.

He does not give us the reward, Verse 33, Of our sin. That's how just and fair God is. Well, that is true, But Job is still wondering, And we're still wondering, Why we can't see God's justice in action, In the ways that we would expect.

So for Job, That still isn't an answer. God is still on trial. Job's third charge is this.

- [14 : 47] He claims that God is a hypocrite. Elihu again summarises Job's accusation against God In chapter 35, At the beginning, verse 1, Then Elihu said, Do you think this is just?
- You say, I shall be cleared by God. Yet you ask him, What profit is it to me? And what do I gain by not sinning? In effect, Job has been saying, What's the point of following God?
- What's the point in me living a good life If all I do is suffer? You don't seem to be very good at times, So why should I? It's like God is a hypocrite.
- He expects us to be just and fair In our dealings with people, But it seems that God is absolutely free To do what he likes. That is not fair. God, you're a hypocrite.
- But, says Elihu, God is right. Look at verse 5. Look up to the heavens and see. Gaze at those clouds That are so high above you.
- [16 : 04] In other words, God is way beyond you. If you were to sin, How does that affect him? Even if your sins are many, What does that do to him?
- Does it change him? Or what if you're righteous? What if you do good things? What do you give him? Or what does he receive from your hand When you're a good person?
- You see, God, who is so above us, Does not respond to us According to our performance. God is not changed by how good Or how bad we are.
- No, we must never judge God On the basis of what we do Or do not receive from God. God acts in our lives Because God is right.
- In fact, if anyone is hypocritical, It's us. Verse 9 People cry out under a load of oppression.
- [17 : 07] They plead for relief From the arm of the powerful. I think we can identify with that, Can't we? There's plenty of emergency prayers That go off to God When we're suffering.
- Please, Lord, end this suffering. Please heal this. Please stop this. Do this now. Verse 35 Or sorry, verse 11 I'm sorry, back to verse 10 But no one says, Where is God, my maker, Who gives songs in the night, Who teaches more to us Than to the beasts of the earth, And makes us wiser Than the birds of the air?
- In other words, It's us who ask God for help. We cry out those emergency prayers, Come and do something. But then we just quickly forget him. We ignore him With the rest of our lives.
- So is it any wonder That people feel hard done by God? Verse 13 Indeed, God doesn't listen To their empty plea. The Almighty pays no attention to it.
- So God is right In how he acts and responds. But, again, it's another big but, Job is not like that. And this is our problem.
- [18 : 26] Job does not ignore God. He does cry out to God, But he certainly doesn't ignore him. He consistently maintains His trust in God.
- So he's still not satisfied With the answer. God is still on trial. Job's fourth charge Is perhaps the strongest of them all.
- That God is not in control. Now, although in chapters 36 to 37 There's no actual quote from Job, Elihu's answer in these two chapters Seem to suggest that This is Job's claim against God.
- Up to this point, All the evidence is pointing to the fact That God is not in control of this universe. There's too many bad things that happen, Too much that goes wrong To say that God is in charge.
- But Elihu will not let us go there. Verse 22 of chapter 36 God is exalted in his power.
- [19 : 39] Who is a teacher like him? Verse 26 How great is God beyond our understanding? The number of his years is past finding out.

Just consider for a moment How God controls the weather systems. And we know all about this in this country, Don't we? Verse 27 He draws up the drops of water Which distill as rain to the streams.

The clouds pour down their moisture And abundant showers fall on mankind. Who can understand how he spreads out the clouds?

How he thunders from his pavilion? If you think that God is not in control of the world he made, Look at verse 5 of 37.

Chapter 37, verse 5 God's voice thunders in marvellous ways. He does great things beyond our understanding.

[20 : 49] He says to the snow, Fall on the earth. And to the rain shower, Be a mighty downpour. So that all men he has made may know his work.

He stops every man from his labour. The animals take cover. They remain in their dens. The tempest comes out from its chamber. The cold from the driving winds.

The breath of God produces ice. And icebergs. And the broad waters become frozen. He loads the clouds with moistures.

He scatters his lightning through them. At his direction they swirl around over the face of the whole earth. To do whatever he commands them. He brings the clouds to punish men.

Or to water his earth. And show his love. We need to see that we do not hold the world together.

[21 : 54] We do not make things happen. God remains not only the creator of the world, but also the one who is in control of this world.

We may discuss with each other over tea and coffee, if I were God, I would do this.

We might dream as we lay in our beds at night, if I were God, I would do that. In the bad days, we might even, like Job, have God in trial and put him in the dock and throw our questions at him.

But the reality is, we are not God. His ways and his work is beyond us. Chapter 37, verse 23. The Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power, in his justice, and great righteousness.

He does not oppress. Therefore people revere him, for does he not have regard for all the wise in heart? Understanding God is beyond our reach.

[23 : 15] But thankfully, we are not beyond his reach. While we don't know God's ways, he knows our ways.

He knows about our life intimately. For God reached down to us. God entered into our suffering world.

He came into a world where he himself experienced injustice. God in Christ came into a world where he encountered unfairness.

Have a look at 1 Peter, chapter 2. I've got a page number. I don't know if it's there. If you've got a page number, someone.

1 Peter, chapter 2. 1, 2, 1, 8. Page 1, 2, 1, 8.

[24 : 19] 1 Peter, chapter 2. Here we are given a picture of the God who came to experience injustice and encountered unfairness.

1 Peter 2, verse 22. Speaking of Christ, He committed no sin. He committed no sin. He committed no sin. And no deceit was found in his mouth.

Thank you.