

When God's People Suffer: Misunderstanding Suffering

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Preacher: Jonny Grant

[0 : 00] something, Job responds, and they do it again three times. This endless, if you like, getting at Job about his suffering, and we're going to be looking at that just at different sections. So we're going to be at Job chapter 4, so you'll need your Bibles open as we flick from page to page.

Well, let's pray and ask for God's help for us this morning. Father, again, we recognize that in dealing with such a subject of suffering, it is not only very real for so many people, it's not just an intellectual problem, it is experiential, whether it's in our own lives or we see it in the ones we love the most. And therefore, we ask for your help to be able to understand suffering from your perspective and to see it how we should, and to pray for your Holy Spirit's help to understand your word, the life of Job and how it points us ultimately to the Lord Jesus and his suffering for us. So we pray for your help to us all today. Amen. Amen. I'm sure many of you have heard of the lady called Joni or Joni Erickson Tadda. She's a quadriplegic.

Basically, it means that she's got no movement from the neck down to her toes. She's been like this for over 40 years of her life. As a teenager, she broke her neck in a diving accident.

And she's been confined to a wheelchair ever since. And as a follower of Jesus, she's written and she's spoken many, many times about suffering and has been a means of support to many people around the world. In her recent book, I have it here, it's called *A Place of Healing*. And if you are suffering, I recommend this as somebody who has suffered greatly and is suffering greatly, but finds great hope in the Lord. An excellent, excellent book. Well, in this book, she recounts a time where she met this man one Sunday morning after the meeting. Let me read it to you.

[2 : 43] It was a beautiful Sunday morning and services were over. I was wheeling across the church parking lot toward my van when a handsome young man who introduced himself as David stopped me.

Are you Joni? he asked. I smiled, nodding yes. Oh, great, David exclaimed. I'm a visitor here and I was hoping I would run into you today. I've really been praying for you. My eyes got wide. Really? What about?

You're healing. I've been praying for you to get out of your wheelchair. At that point, my spirit hesitated. David was a visitor. He came to church hoping to see me and he wanted to see me healed.

Well, I never refuse a prayer for healing, I assured David. The guy wasted no time in getting down to business, launching into what sounded like a prepared speech. Have you ever considered that it might be sin standing in the way of your healing? That you've disobeyed in some way? Before I could answer, David flipped open his Bible, both of us still in the middle of the parking lot, and read from the Gospel of Luke.

Some men came carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up onto the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd right in front of Jesus.

[4 : 19] He closed his Bible and reminded me that the paralyzed man in the story was healed, and I could be healed too if only I would but confess my sins and have faith to believe.

He added, Joni, there must be some sin in your life that you haven't dealt with yet. Now, there is some truth, and hear me out, there is some truth in what David said to Joni.

Sometimes, sin does lead to suffering. So, if I indulge myself in all kinds of physical pleasures and kind of live the life of Riley, and I end up with a failed liver, HIV, and a broken marriage, well then, yes, sin has led to my suffering.

But to say in this instance, as we read from this story, that sin always leads to suffering, is a terrible misunderstanding of suffering.

Sometimes, innocent people, like Joni, suffer terribly. Job finds himself in a similar situation.

[5 : 41] His three friends that we met at the end of chapter 2, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, have come to sympathize and comfort him. Well, that was fine until they got their Bibles out and started to preach to Job for 23 chapters.

Their message was simple. I've put it up on the screen here. Their summary of all their teaching was simply this. If you suffer, God is punishing you for your sin.

Job, you're suffering. Therefore, Job, there must be some terrible sin in your life that you haven't yet confessed. Now, while there is some connection between sin and suffering, to say that Job's suffering was connected to his sin is really to misunderstand Job's innocent suffering.

Chapter 1 has told us very clearly that he was blameless. He loved God. He loved God. He hated evil. So what do these three friends have to teach us in their misunderstanding of suffering?

Well, they teach us simply what we should not say and what we should not think about those who suffer through no fault of their own.

[7 : 03] So we're going to look at their three friends one by one and see what they have to say, how they misunderstand suffering and how we should be careful not to misunderstand in the same way.

So let's start with their first friend, Eliphaz. His message is very simple. Innocent people, he says, don't suffer. Look at chapter 4, verse 3.

He's speaking to Job. Job, think how you've instructed many, how you have strengthened feeble hands. Your words have supported those who stumbled and you have strengthened faltering knees.

But now trouble comes to you and you are discouraged. It strikes you and you are dismayed. Job, if you're wondering how an innocent man like you is suffering, well then let me give you an answer.

Verse 7. Consider now who being innocent has ever perished. Where were the upright ever destroyed?

[8 : 12] As I have observed those who plough evil and those who sow trouble reap it. At the breath of God, they are destroyed. At the blast of his anger, they perish.

You see, Job, it's simple. Innocent people don't suffer. And if you had behaved yourself, then all these bad things would never have happened. The best way to understand your suffering, Job, is to see it as God's discipline in your life.

Look at chapter 5, verse 17. Blessed is the man whom God corrects.

So do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For he wounds, but he also binds up. He injures, but his hands also heal. Verse 27.

We have examined this, and this is true. So hear it and apply it to yourself. Well, Eliphaz is not finished with Job.

[9 : 20] He picks up another speech in chapter 15. Let's have a look at that. Chapter 15 and verse 17. He's got more so-called wisdom to pass on.

Chapter 15, verse 17. Listen to me and I will explain to you. Let me tell you what I have seen. What wise men have declared. Hidden nothing or hiding nothing received from their fathers.

Verse 24. Distress and anguish fill him with terror. They overwhelm him like a king poised to attack because he shakes his fist at God and vaunts himself against the Almighty.

Can you see what's happening, Job? If you would only stop fighting God, stop claiming your innocence, and just admit your sin to God, and everything would be all right.

And in case we're missing the point that Eliphaz is trying to make, look at chapter 22, verse 4. Is it for your piety that he rebukes you and brings charges against you?

[10 : 44] Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless? Verse 21. Submit to God then, and be at peace with him.

In this way prosperity will come to you. Accept instruction from his mouth, and lay up his words in your heart. If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored.

If you remove wickedness from your tent, and assign your nuggets to the dust, your gold of offer to the rocks in the ravines, then the Almighty will be your gold, the choice of silver for you.

It's a little bit like the words of David to Joni. They completely missed the point. And this line of thinking, unfortunately, is not uncommon.

I had a brief watch again of the God channel just to make sure that what I think is actually what they teach, but if you listen to it, and don't really listen to it because there's nothing there to listen to, you will hear speaker after speaker claiming that if you just confess your sin, you will be healed.

[12:02] All you need to tell God is the problem, and he's going to deliver you from it. And they'll stand there and say, in the name of Jesus, confess your sin, and don't forget to write a check and send in a few dollars, and all your suffering will end.

The idea that innocent people don't suffer and that sin is the cause is a common way that people try to explain suffering in people's lives.

But it's very wrong, very misunderstood. Well, let's look at his second so-called friend, Bildad.

His message is simple as well. Godless people are punished. Let's go to chapter 8.

Job, do you want to know why all your children and all their families were wiped out in that tornado?

Well, let me give you a reason for why that happened. Chapter 8, verse 4.

[13:11] And let's remember how suffering, how awful this suffering was for this man and what has happened to him. And he gets advice like this. Verse 4 of chapter 8. When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin.

But if you will look to God and plead with the Almighty, if you are pure and upright, even now he will rouse himself on your behalf and restore you to your rightful place.

Job, it's simple. You can't disconnect your suffering from your sin. Verse 11. Can papyrus grow tall where there is no marsh?

Can reeds thrive without water? While still growing uncut, they wither more quickly than grass. Such is the destiny of all who forget God.

So perishes the hope of the godless. Job, can't you see what's happening? Your children suffered because they forgot God and now you're doing exactly the same.

[14:21] Verse 20. Surely God does not reject a blameless man or strengthen the hands of evildoers. Sort your life out, Job.

Well, Bildad is convinced that if you live a godless life, then things are going to go wrong from you. Look at chapter 18. Chapter 18, verse 11.

He's saying here, if you live a godless life, then the sign of a godless life is, well, things are going to go wrong.

Chapter 18, verse 11. Terrors startle him on every side and dog him his every step. Calamity is hungry for him. Disaster is ready for him when he falls.

And look how these next verses relate so much to his own suffering. It eats away parts of his skin. Death's firstborn devours its limbs. Verse 18.

[15:27] He is driven from light into darkness and is banished from the world. He has no offspring or descendants among his people. No survivor where he once lived.

Verse 21. Surely such is the dwelling of an evil man. Such is the place of one who knows not God. And if we think they haven't kicked Job enough, Bildad is ruthless in his final charge.

Chapter 25, verse 4. Chapter 25, verse 4.

How then can a man be righteous before God? How can one born of a woman be pure? If even the moon is not bright and the stars are not pure in his eyes, how much less man who is but a maggot, a son of man who is only a worm.

Now this way of explaining suffering is also very common. I've heard countless pastors and Bible teachers and let me say very bad Bible teachers who come up with suggestions and reasons like this that the reason why the Twin Towers, that terrorist attack on 9-11 happened was well because America allows abortion.

[17:02] And that's why it happened. In the same way when the tsunami hit Indonesia, people were coming out saying it was God's punishment on the awful sex trade that there is in Indonesia.

Likewise, when the earthquake destroyed Haiti, people claimed that it was God's judgment on all the witchcraft and the voodoo that was going on. But I ask ourselves the same question, who are we in this country to make such judgments on behalf of God?

Are we really any better to the rest of the world that we have escaped such suffering? It's a very dangerous line to pursue and to make quick judgments that that is what God is doing.

God hasn't said it, and neither should we. Well, let's turn to the third friend, Zophar. We need to go to chapter 11 for that.

His message is also simple. Wicked people deserve worse. Zophar is of the belief that the greater the sin, the greater the suffering.

[18 : 28] So if you sin lots, well, then you're going to suffer lots. Look at chapter 11, verse 4. He's speaking to Job.

He says, You say to God, My beliefs are flawless, and I am pure in your sight. Oh, how I wish that God would speak, that he would open his lips against you and disclose to you the secrets of wisdom, for true wisdom has two sides.

Know this, Job. God has even forgotten some of your sin. In other words, Job, it's only because God is so patient that you are not actually suffering more than what you are.

Verse 13. Yet if you devote your heart to him and stretch out your hands to him, if you put away the sin that is in your hands and allow no evil to dwell in your tent, then you will lift up your face without shame.

You will stand firm and without fear. But because you're not turning from your wickedness, Job, look at verse 20.

[19 : 38] The eyes of the wicked will fail and escape will elude them. Their hope will become a dying gasp.

In other words, Job, you deserve every bit of suffering that you get. And once again, his final speech in verse 20.

He just heaps abuse upon abuse onto poor Job. Chapter 20, verse 22. This is how he understands what's happening to Job's life.

Chapter 20, verse 22. In the midst of his plenty, distress will overtake him. The full force of misery will come upon him. When he has filled his belly, God will vent his burning anger against him and rain down his blows upon him.

Verse 27. The heavens will expose his guilt. The earth will rise up against him. A flood will carry off his house, rushing waters on the day of God's wrath.

[20 : 46] Such is the fate God allots the wicked, the heritage appointed for them by God. Now, unfortunately, this is also a common philosophy today.

It goes something like this, that if you do good, then good will be returned to you. In Hinduism, it's called karma.

If you do bad, then bad will be given out to you. And even within our own Christian society, we've imbibed that same kind of belief.

So why is it that when something goes wrong in our life, we immediately think, I must have done something wrong and God is punishing me for it. Or, if we do something good and we do lots of good things, then we sometimes think, well, maybe God is going to bless me because I did all these good things.

It's a terrible way of thinking. God does not respond to us like that. It's a common way to think, but it's a very wrong way to think.

[21 : 58] So that's the wisdom of Job's three friends. They have failed to understand that sometimes our personal sin is actually not the cause of our suffering.

Sometimes innocent people, just like Joni that we read about at the beginning and even Sandra shared at her testimony, sometimes innocent people suffer through no fault of their own.

Well, I guess the question that we are all asking now is, how do we know when suffering is related to my sin?

Hmm? I wonder if somebody wouldn't mind just running around to our lovely spraying friend and ask him to go past the door a little bit. Thanks, Rob, very much.

Maybe he could do the front. I did give him a cup of tea in Buns, so it's all right. We're not out against him. But there's a question that we're all asking, isn't there, that how do we know then when my suffering is related to my sin?

[23 : 17] There is a connection, but how do I know if it is my sin? Well, let me give three ways to understand our suffering so that whenever we get a headache or we happen to hit our thumb with the hammer, we're not immediately thinking, there's some unconfessed sin in my life.

Three things that we'll look at. First, we live in a sinful, broken world. Genesis records for us the good world that God created.

We know the story of how God looked out on the world and when he had finished his creation, he said it was very good. There was unity and there was harmony within creation.

But when we get to Genesis 3, we read that man who was created by God rebelled against his creator, God. And the consequences of all that have been felt ever since. Now we live in a world where there's death and disease. There's disorder and there's brokenness. Life doesn't work the way it's meant to. The cogs in the wheels have got stuck and jammed and everything grinds and twists with terrible suffering.

[24 : 31] That's why we have earthquakes and tornadoes and tsunamis. That's why we have mindless, violent attacks on children like we saw in Toulouse this week.

That's why we have terrible tragedies like the recent bus crash in Switzerland. Sometimes suffering happens not because of our specific sin, but simply because we live in a broken and a disordered world.

In John's Gospel, the disciples came to Jesus on one occasion and tried to make this connection between personal sin and suffering. There was this man who was blind from birth and the disciples asked him, chapter 9, verse 1 of John's Gospel, his disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?

Listen to Jesus' reply. Neither this man nor his parents sinned. But Jesus said, this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.

You see, sometimes suffering happens simply because we live in a broken and a disordered world. Secondly, then, we are not treated as our sins deserve.

[26 : 05] We're not treated as our sins deserve. One of the underlying questions that comes out of the book of Job, and indeed it's raised in the whole Bible, is not, why do I suffer?

But why do I not suffer more? That's the real question. Not why do I suffer, but why do I not suffer more?

The reality is, we are actually more wicked and more rebellious than we realise. And the history of the world in which we live is a catalogue of disaster.

Wars and genocide, greed and corruption, unjust leaders and power-hungry leaders. There's the abuse of children, trafficking of women, the oppression of the poor, relationship fallout, marriage breakdown, anger, hate, slander and lies.

And it goes on day after day after day. So the question is not, why do we suffer? But why is God so patient and long-suffering with us and with this world?

[27 : 18] If God was being just, he would wipe us all out and the world would end. That's the real surprise. Well, why is God so long-suffering and patient with us?

Well, the answer comes through the Bible story as he shows his character. If you want, you can turn to Psalm 103. We actually sang from this psalm earlier on.

Psalm 103, verse 8. verse 8 of Psalm 103, the Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.

He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever. He does not treat us as our sins deserve, or repay us according to our iniquities.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

[28 : 42] As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. Of course, that love and compassion is shown supremely on the cross, the place where God died for my sin and for your sin.

The God who suffered for you and for me. So we live in a sinful and broken world.

Second, we're not treated as our sins deserve. And third, we can look forward to a world without sin. God made a good world.

We see that in Genesis 3 and he's promised to renew and restore this sin-infested, broken world.

God promises that there is a world to come that's going to be without sin and without suffering.

However, between this point where we are now and the point of Christ's return, he also promises us that there will be suffering and that we should expect suffering.

[29 : 57] But to give us hope and to help us through our journey in this life, he gives us these pictures of this wonderful promise to all those who will turn to him and those who will trust him.

One of those pictures is found in Isaiah chapter 65. And all I ask is just that you just be quiet for a minute and just listen to these words here that paint a picture of a world without sin and without suffering.

Just meditate and think on these words. behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth.

The former things will not be remembered nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create.

For I will create Jerusalem to be a delight, its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people. And the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.

[31 : 20] Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days. An old man who does not live out his years. And we can add to that there will be no more shootings in Toulouse and there will be no more sudden death of a nephew.

They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune for they will be a people blessed by the Lord. They and their descendants with them.

Before they call I will answer. While they are still speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will feed together. And the lion and the ox will eat straw.

But dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain says the Lord.

Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray Father we thank you for this amazing picture that one day there will be no more weeping no more crying there will be no more sin and there will be no more suffering things will never go wrong there will be no wheel chairs and there will never be another car crash we thank you that one day Christ will come and he will put all things right we thank you that you do not treat us as our sins deserve but we praise you and we thank you that you have entered our suffering world to do something about it help us with the eyes of faith to look to the

[33 : 44] Lord Jesus help us to trust him help us to walk with him and we pray this in Jesus name amen before we share together around the Lord's supper we're going to sing a song that it's the next song could you go on to yep there's a place where the streets shine it points us forward to a world without sin and a world without suffering and the chorus reminds us that all our sins have been washed away and that is why we have that hope let's stand together as we encourage