

Why Does God Allow Pain and Suffering?

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Date: 01 October 2023

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's reading is from the book of Job, chapter 1, verses 8 to 22.

Then the Lord said to Satan, Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him. He is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.

Does Job fear God for nothing? Satan replied. Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land.

But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face. The Lord said to Satan, Very well then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.

[1 : 17] Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord. One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, and the Sabaeans attacked and made off with them.

They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you. While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, The fire of God fell from the heavens and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you.

While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, The Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you.

While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house.

It collapsed on them, and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you. At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said, Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart.

[2 : 26] The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. May the name of the Lord be praised. In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Good morning, Christ Church. It's good to be with you. And again, if you're here for Explore God, have come along with a friend or responded to an invitation, we're super glad that you're here.

Last week, we looked at the purpose and the meaning of life, and today we're thinking about the acid test of whatever your purpose or meaning of life is.

Have you found a purpose, have you found a meaning for your life that suffering cannot take away from you? That's the question. There's nothing more certain than that you're going to suffer, and the people you love are going to suffer.

Suffering is everywhere. It's unavoidable. The scope of it is often overwhelming. And as Shakespeare wrote in Macbeth, What he's saying there is that really no one's immune from suffering.

[3 : 44] No matter what precautions we take or how well we put together a good life or how hard we work to be healthy or wealthy or comfortable with our friends and family to be successful in our career, at some point, those things will be ruined by the four Ds, disease, disaster, disappointment, and death.

And I appreciate the scriptures because they're just incredibly realistic about the fact that human life is fatally fragile and subject to forces that are beyond our power to manage.

As I come to this subject, I've had a very privileged life, but I do speak as a fellow sufferer, someone who in my childhood struggled with chronic health issues.

I lost my mom when I was 19 years old, spent my 20s in a dark night of the soul. And I would say even the last four or five years of my life in ministry, I would call a fiery furnace and a valley of shadows.

And so I don't speak to you about suffering in an attached, like, theoretical manner today. And I know that some of you are here with raw pain.

[5 : 07] And so what you need probably more than this sermon is just a hug, you know, a church family that can love you through that pain and mourn with those who mourn.

But when we suffer, it's natural for us to ask the question, why? Right? Has anybody ever asked that question? Why would God, why would a good and just and loving and powerful God allow misery and depravity and anguish into my life?

And those questions that we have about God, they actually increase the sense of pain in our hearts and the doubts that we have in our minds. And so I want to engage those questions that I think all of us have through this book and this biography about Job.

There's no book in the Bible, no piece of world literature that addresses these big questions of suffering with such emotional realism and spiritual wisdom as this book.

It's a lyric, epic poem. There's nothing like it in the Bible. And it's like all good sermons. It has three parts.

[6 : 21] There's an opening dialogue between God and Satan. There's this long middle dialogue between Job and his friends. And then there's this final closing dialogue between God and Job.

And what this book tells us is that suffering is this common burden for all of humanity, and yet it's a lonely burden for each one of us in its own uniqueness and particularity.

And in this opening chapter, we find some pretty deep wisdom, I think, about this question of why does God allow pain and suffering? And more than that, how do we endure the inevitable burdens of human life?

Do you want to know the answer to these questions? So we're going to talk about the question of suffering for a bit. We're going to talk about living by grace without a full answer.

And then we're going to talk about looking ahead to the final answer. So the question of suffering, living by grace without a full answer, and looking ahead to the final answer.

[7 : 27] Let's talk for a moment about the question of suffering. If you look in verse 8, it says, Then the Lord said to Satan, Have you considered my servant Job? There's no one on earth like him.

He is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And this immediately raises for us the question of where does suffering come from? What is the cause of suffering?

And there are different cultures that have grown up over the millennia that have explained events or given explanation of events to give meaning to our experiences of suffering.

And so today, for a moment, I want to kind of compare and contrast those different cultures of suffering with what we find here in the book of Job. We all know whenever there's a mass shooting or some sort of act of violence, there's a typical range of responses that are derived from these different cultures of suffering about the cause of pain and our response to pain and the ultimate resolution of that pain.

And people seek to address these dark moments by focusing on the cause. Now, I think we may have a slide, if we can pull that up, and it'll kind of help make some sense of what I'm going to say here.

[8 : 40] But the first culture, the moralistic culture, says that present suffering pays for past sins, some failure to live rightly in the past.

An example of this would be Hinduism and the doctrine of karma. But secondly, there's this self-transcendent culture that talks about the illusory nature of the material world and our individual self and our unfulfilled desires.

And an example of that would be Buddhism. And then you have these fatalistic cultures that say our circumstances are fixed by the stars, they're fixed by cosmic forces.

This is what the Greco-Roman Stoics said, it's what the Northern European pagans said, it's what the Islam in the Middle Ages said. And then more recently, you have this secular, or actually, you have this dualistic culture that says the world is a battleground between forces of pure light and pure darkness.

An ancient version of that was called Manichaeism. A more modern version of that is various forms of Marxism. And then you have more recently the secular culture that says this world is all there is, this world is all that we have, and suffering is seen as an accident.

[9 : 57] It's chance misfortune. It's just a random interruption of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And the universe just looks on with pitiless indifference. Now, when you kind of look at these different cultures of suffering, you may notice that secular culture does a pretty bad job of equipping people to suffer well.

All these older cultures taught that suffering was to be an expected part of having a coherent life story, and that through suffering, suffering was actually a means by which you could grow and live your life well.

But secular culture is one of the weakest and worst cultures in human history at providing its members with an explanation for suffering, and it gives us very little guidance and resources for how to deal with it.

And that means that our society is increasingly shocked and undone and traumatized by suffering way more than our ancestors were, because when no explanation is given, suffering is perceived as simply senseless and a complete waste.

And then the victims of suffering develop deep and undying anger and poisonous hate, and that inevitably leads to serious social instability, which I think we probably all can bear witness to.

[11 : 28] We see that increasing quite a bit in our society. So I want to ask the question, as we think about these cultures of suffering and we place Christianity alongside of them, how does Christianity deal with this question of suffering and the cause of suffering?

And I want to look at this opening dialogue between God and Satan, and I hope that you can see that the way that this avoids the various problems and dead ends of this spectrum from moralism to secularism.

Again, it says in verse 8, Then the Lord said to Satan, Have you considered my servant Job? There's no one on earth like him. He's blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.

Verse 9, Does Job fear God for nothing? Satan replied. Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land.

But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face. And the Lord said to Satan, Very well, then everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.

[12 : 40] Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord. Satan says, Do you think Job fears you and is a good servant to you? Well, if you hurt him or if you let bad stuff be unleashed upon him, you'll see that he's actually no good.

And so God says, Okay, you can do this, but you cannot do that. And so Satan goes out and he strips Job of his wealth and his kids, as we just read about in chapter 1.

He strips Job of his health and his wife, as you can read about in chapter 2. He begins to strip Job of his closest friends, as you can read about starting in chapter 4.

And we look onto this and we're horrified to think that God and Satan are playing chess with this little pawn named Job. But I don't want you to miss the brilliance and the profound teaching of these couple verses that are woven in here because no other religion, no other philosophy has this belief that there's an asymmetrical relationship between God and suffering.

Whose idea is it that all this bad stuff would be unleashed upon Job and who does it? It's Satan. God is not actively, directly generating suffering.

[14 : 04] In fact, when God made the world, there was no disease, no disaster, no disappointment, no death. All these forces of darkness were unleashed at the fall of humanity and when we turned away from God and we rebelled against God and so the fabric of creation began to unravel, we are responsible for all those hard things that came into the world.

And you can see in this text that God is not deliberately, intentionally, actively desiring suffering in Job's life. Satan does. But God is in absolute control and he has all authority.

So this is not dualism. It's not two equally powerful opposing forces of pure light and pure darkness fighting against each other. God is in charge. God is sovereign and supreme.

Evil is already in the world and so God permits it and he says very well, Job is in your power. But God also limits it and says you can do this but you can't do that.

On Job himself, do not lay a finger. And why does God allow this? Well, the answer is not moralism. This whole book is dedicated to showing that Job does not suffer as a direct cause of some particular sin or some specific failure to live rightly on his part.

[15 : 28] If only he'd gone to church more, if only he'd prayed more, if only he'd read his Bible more, if only he'd had more faith, if only he'd been more diligent. No, this book is written to disabuse us of that kind of religious moralism.

So why did God allow this? Well, the answer, of course, is also not secularism, that Job's suffering is not an accident. It's not a chance misfortune. It's not a random interruption with the universe looking on in pitiless indifference.

Why does God allow this? He allows it in order for Satan to accomplish the opposite of what he wanted to accomplish. What is, what's the result that Satan wants by bringing evil and suffering into Job's life?

He wants to discredit Job. He wants to show and reveal Job's true colors. He wants to expose him as a hypocrite and as a fraud and show that God, Job is actually quite an awful covenant partner to you.

He serves you not out of pure, disinterested godliness, but out of self-interest. He's in this relationship with you, not for you yourself, but he's in it for the gifts that you can give to him.

[16 : 50] He's related to you not out of conscience and conviction, but out of comfort and convenience. And when you take that comfort and convenience away, we all know what's going to happen.

So did, was Satan right? Did he accomplish his scheme? Well, here we are in Berkeley thousands of years later talking about Job as one of the most courageous, honest, resilient people, human beings that's ever lived, living by grace and faith in God.

And the point of this story is that God hates evil. God is against evil. He doesn't create a world in which evil existed, but He permits Satan to bring evil into Job's life and into your life in a limited way and a bounded amount such that it completely defeats Satan's real intention.

God's sovereignty is such that even the rebellious unintentionally serve his purposes. And Satan is only allowed by God to defeat himself and achieve the opposite of what he intended.

The death of my mom, the death of your child, disease, disasters, disappointments that are in our present are coming to us in our future.

[18 : 19] God hates these things. God weeps over our suffering. But, Job tells us, God is in control and He's permitting and allowing these things to come into your life so that He can defeat Satan's purpose for you.

And so that, like Job, He can make you into a righteous and a wise human being. Have I answered all of your questions about suffering? Probably not.

But I think this is an important beginning to talking about the question of suffering. But I want to move from the question of suffering to living by grace without a full answer.

Living by grace without a full answer. When suffering comes into your life, it will not leave you the way that you were before you suffered. Right?

When suffering comes, you're either going to become better or worse, more tender or more hard, more, you're going to have deeper roots or you're going to become more shallow, you're going to become more wise, or you're going to become more foolish.

[19 : 25] And what happened to Job? Well, it says in verse 20 that at this, Job got up and he tore his robe and shaved his head and then he fell to the ground in worship.

And this is neither the self-transcendent culture that says the world and yourself and your pain is an illusion, nor is it the fatalistic culture that says grin and bear it.

No, Job says pain is real and he's grieving with overwhelming grief and yet he falls on the ground in worship and what does he say in verse 21?

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. And in all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

This is astonishing, really. He's just lost all of his money. He's lost seven sons. He's lost three daughters. He's in immense pain and yet somehow in the middle of that pain he's holding on to a theology of grace.

[20 : 36] Right? He does not say, God, how dare you take away my wealth and my kids. All of that was mine and I sacrificed much to get it. No, what does he say? He says, I came into the world vulnerable and helpless and I'm going to leave the world that way and all that I have has come on loan from God.

God gave it all to me. They're gifts of his grace. He's the owner and I'm the steward and he has a sovereign right just as he gave it to withdraw it as he sees fit.

That's a very different way to live. What this tells us is that if you build your foundation on the stuff of this world and if you say the purpose and the meaning of my life is built on life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness and what gives me my identity, what defines me, what makes me who I am is my work and my money and my position and my name and my spouse and my kids and my family.

Well, when all of that is taken away from you, where does that leave you? Who are you and what are you without those things?

But you see, if you, like Job, if you build your life on God, it says in verse 8 that Job fears God. He has an awe in God as his maker. He has a sense of wonder before God as his judge.

[22 : 02] If you build your life on God, then your ultimate love is not your loved ones, but it's the love of God. And your ultimate wealth is not your money, but it's knowing God.

And your ultimate status is not in your position and your health. It's in your relationship with God. So that when all of these things are stripped away from you, the people that you love, your wealth, your health, your position, your work, you can still be you because you still have God.

And you have an identity, you have a meaning that suffering can never take away from you. When you read the rest of this book, you'll see that life for Job does not get any easier after chapter 1.

It actually gets much, much harder. He loses his health, he loses his wife, then he starts to argue and wrestle with his friends who are, you know, well-meaning but miserable comforters who try to talk to him about God.

And Job's like, what do you know about God? And at the end of this book, Job has his own encounter and dialogue with God. And what does God say?

[23 : 17] It says in Job 38, verse 1, then the Lord spoke to Job out of the whirlwind, out of the storm, and he said, who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

Brace yourself like a man. I will question you and you shall answer me. And in that moment, God does not say, hey, listen Job, I realize that all this has been really hard on you and Satan, what's been happening is Satan's been trying to destroy you because he believes you don't really love me but you love all the gifts that you get from me, your wealth and your health and all those things.

And he thinks that the moment that you lose those gifts, you're gonna walk away from me so I'm allowing him to unleash these things in your life because I know that you fear me and I'm letting this fiery furnace of suffering come in so that you can become one of the greatest people who's ever lived and changed countless lives for eternity.

Is that what God says to Job? Does God ever reveal to Job why he's suffering? No, Job has to learn to suffer even though he does not know God's infinitely wise and knowledgeable reasons why he's suffering.

Because if Job knew all the reasons, he'd be serving God not for God but for the benefits he's getting out of his suffering. And the only way to be sure that you can know that you're serving God for who he is and not what you're getting out of him or out of the relationship is if you're in a position where serving God is actually giving you nothing.

[24 : 58] In fact, serving God may be making your life worse and you're getting nothing out of it at all. And that's what happens with Job. For 37 agonizing chapters, Job does not find God even though he's seeking God relentlessly.

And he has to learn to struggle with God who's in control and whom he cannot control and who is silent for a very, very long time. And Job must learn to just simply trust in God out of sheer faith even when experience and appearances seem to contradict his faith.

And friends, we too have to embrace the mystery that we're not going to know all the reasons why our all-knowing and infinitely wise God allows our suffering.

But this is precisely how we become true and full and deep human beings. You see, Job fights his way through to God so that the deeper his darkness, the more his grip tightens on God.

And I'll just give you two high points from Job. He says these two things in the midst of the brute facts of his unmerited suffering, in the midst of his friends who are reproaching him and assigning wrongdoing to him, in the midst of the world's intolerable wrongs.

[26 : 25] Job says this in Job 23. He says, if I go to the east, God is not there. If I go to the west, I do not find him. When he is at work in the north, I do not see him.

When he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him. But he knows the way that I take. And when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.

My feet have closely followed his steps. I have kept to his way without turning aside. I have not departed from the commands of his lips. I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread.

That's a man who's suffering by grace without a full answer. And then his most famous saying of all in Job 19, he says, for I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth.

And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God. You see, if you build your life on things, then suffering's gonna drive you away from your source of joy.

[27 : 38] But if you build your life on God, then suffering's gonna drive you deeper into him, deeper and deeper into your very source of joy. I wanna close.

We talked about the question of suffering and living by grace without a full answer, but I also wanna talk about looking ahead to the final answer. This long, painful season in Job's life is not gonna be the last time that Satan assaults a human being and particularly God's chosen and beloved partner.

And centuries later, we see a cross outside of the city gate of Jerusalem, and there on that cross is God in the flesh dying, naked, and he's crying out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And when that question is launched from Jesus' lips, the Father does not give his son an answer to that question, at least not right away.

And you see, when Job suffered, he was relatively innocent, but Jesus here in this moment is the absolutely holy, innocent sufferer. Job felt abandoned by God, but here's Jesus, the man of sorrows, truly abandoned by God, even though he's the only one, the only human being who ever truly served God for nothing because there was nothing in it for him.

[29 : 10] And so when you are suffering and you don't know why and your heart is crying out in pain, I want to encourage you to look at Jesus, this innocent sufferer, because the Scripture's startling message is that the deepest revelation of the character of God is actually in the weakness and suffering and death of Jesus on the cross.

It's the exact opposite of where humanity expects to find God, right? Christianity is alone among the world religions that claims that God himself knows firsthand despair, rejection, loneliness, poverty, bereavement, torture, imprisonment, rejection, rejection, and death.

And here in Jesus Christ, God is experiencing the greatest depths of pain far beyond what any of us can ever imagine or will ever go through because here on the cross, Jesus Christ is losing the infinite love of the Father that he's had from all eternity.

He's experiencing the endless exclusion from God as a penalty for our sin. And you see, in death, Jesus Christ, God in the flesh is suffering in love for us.

He comes to identify with those who are abandoned and God forsaken by being himself abandoned and God forsaken. And yet, Jesus did not die renouncing God like so many victims of suffering.

[30 : 51] Even in his fiery furnace of agony and affliction, he did not surrender his faith in God but he expressed it in this anguished cry which is actually a cry of affirmation, my God, my God, he says.

So in death, God is suffering alongside of us. God is suffering for us. Why does God allow pain and suffering?

Well, when we look at the cross of Jesus Christ, God is certainly not indifferent or detached from our condition. He takes our misery so seriously that he's willing to take it on himself.

And when God raises up the body of Jesus from his tomb, he's assuring us that our sins have been paid for so that someday God can indeed end evil and suffering without bringing an end to us.

That we, like Jesus, will live on with him forever. And this gives us an incredibly deep consolation and deep strength to face the harsh realities of life as people of hope.

[32 : 03] This, I think, is what distinguishes Christians from the people around us is that we are people of hope. Secular culture says that in the future, there is no coming restoration after death or after history.

That's it. It's done. Ancient cultures say that one day we're going to lose our individuality when we return into the all soul or that we're going to have some sort of ethereal, disembodied bliss and consolation with our ancestors somewhere.

But Christianity is completely different. Christianity says that we're looking for the resurrection of the body and the restoration of our lives and the reversal of all of our experiences.

That our Christian hope is a material restoration of the body and the life that you never had but that you always wanted. And that one day every horrible thing that's ever happened will not only be undone and repaired by God, but God will in some way use it to make your eventual glory and joy even greater than it could have been without evil and suffering in your life.

I'll close with this quote from Dostoevsky, this great novel, The Brothers Karamazov, and I think it's a beautiful expression of this Christian hope.

[33 : 33] He says, I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for and that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man that in the world's finale at the moment of eternal harmony something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, for all the blood that they've shed that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened.

This is our great hope. Let's come now to this table that's set for us with the broken body and the shed blood of our God, Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.