

Why do bad things happen to good people?

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[0 : 0 0] Well, when faced with the question of suffering, why me is a natural question to ask. Over many years as a minister, I've talked with so many people in their suffering, from cancer wards to car parks, in pain and through tears and at all hours of the day and night, listening to people try to make sense of their suffering. Perhaps through the sudden death of a loved one, they are in pain. Perhaps it's coping with a debilitating illness, maybe difficult family circumstances or another painful life experience. Whatever it is, the question that always seems to come up is, why did God let this happen? Now, in the chapters that we're looking at this afternoon in the book of Job, we basically have a debate about the problem of suffering because God's purposes aren't always clear for those who suffer, as we see in the life of Job, which means our limited human perspective can sometimes make suffering seem random and pointless. But the book of Job actually helps us in our suffering, not by giving us quick fixes or easy answers, as we've seen already, but by wrestling with perplexity of suffering. And ultimately, the book of Job is a book not just about suffering, but about how knowing God can help us better in our suffering. Because the problem of suffering just doesn't simply disappear if you abandon belief in God, it actually makes suffering a far bigger problem.

Because there's nobody to talk to, there's nobody to complain to, there's nobody who can make sense of it. If suffering is all there is, and there is no God, then well, good luck with your life. So it doesn't help when we suffer to remove God from the equation, it just makes suffering more unbearable. But the book of Job helps us see that suffering is a problem for those who believe in God. But we see that knowing God better and understanding God's ways is actually what we need most in our suffering. Because God loves us, and God does have purposes for our lives, even when we don't understand them. And so this afternoon, we're going to look at three points as we look at these chapters together, Job chapter 22 to 27. First of all, the problem of suffering. Secondly, the perplexity of suffering. And then thirdly, the purpose of suffering. So first of all, the problem of suffering. Now, this is really just a brief recap, this point, as we get into the context of the long argument here in Job. Because what we've got, basically in chapters 4 to chapters 27 in Job, is three cycles of speeches. And it really is a massive debate, a heated argument between Job and his friends about the problem of suffering. And Job is really perplexed in his suffering. And he doesn't understand what is going on. And so his friends try to help him make sense of it. And today, we're looking at the third round of this debate. And essentially, Job's friends have nothing new to say. In fact, the debate seems to break down as Job's three friends say little or nothing. Eliphaz says less. Bildad says very little. And Zophar says nothing. And since the friends have been called by Job his miserable comforters, there's a poetic justice in that they are now silenced in these cycle of speeches today. Because the friends, you see, believed that Job had done something wrong. That's why he was suffering. And their moral framework for understanding suffering is basically, well, you get rewarded in life if you're good, and you get punished in life if you're bad. Meaning that, in their framework, there is no innocent suffering for anyone. But this world is too fallen to allow such a neat cause and effect pattern when it comes to suffering. It's simply saying good people have good lives and bad people have bad lives. But we know that's not true. And Job knew that as well. Last week, I heard of somebody, and this is how she described suffering to her children. She said to them, we live in a broken world, and sometimes the pieces cut us. And we know that's true, don't we? And so as the reader, we know why Job suffers. But neither Job nor his friends know why Job suffers. Because we're aware in chapters 1 and 2 that there is this discussion in the heavenly court between God and Satan. And that's where God gave Satan permission to allow Job to suffer. And so while the friends are wrong, Job continues to wrestle with God in his suffering.

[5 : 19] And his speeches take on a new level of intensity from chapters 22 onwards as he questions God's justice. Because for Job, the issue of his suffering, of why God is allowing him to suffer, remains unresolved. And so that's the problem of suffering. Secondly, let's look then at the perplexity of suffering. And this comes through the big long debate between Job and his friends. And this is the third cycle of debates. And first of all, we see that Eliphaz speaks in chapter 22. So look at chapter 22, page 5 to 5. Eliphaz, he continues to insist that basically Job is a wicked sinner. Look at verse 4 and 5 of chapter 22. Is it for your piety that he rebukes you and brings charges against you? Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless? This is a brutal attack from a so-called friend on Job.

And his logic is, Job, you're suffering. That proves that you are wicked. Because his logic is, God blesses us if we're good. God punishes us if we're bad. And so Eliphaz continues to accuse Job of all kinds of evil. And if you look down chapters 22, verse 6 to 11, he's got this entire catalog of sins. Let's just read from verse 6 onwards. Though the pride of the godless person reaches to the heavens. Sorry, wrong chapter. Chapter 22, verse 6. You demanded security from your relatives for no reason. You stripped people of their clothing, leaving them naked. You gave no water to the weary, and you withheld food from the hungry.

Though you were a powerful man, owing land, an honored man living on it, and you sent widows away, empty-handed, and broke the strength of the fatherless. We'll stop there. Eliphaz is just making this stuff up. What Eliphaz says contradicts God's assessment of Job. That Job is blameless and upright. He is a man who fears God and shuns evil. So Eliphaz can't cope with the fact that an upright person would suffer. And so he appeals to Job to return to God. Verse 21 to 26. So look at chapter 22, verse 21. He says, Submit to God 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. So he's saying, Job, if you submit to God, if you repent of your sin, then you'll prosper again. But Eliphaz is wrong about Job. Job doesn't need to repent of any hidden sin in his life. But Eliphaz is also wrong about God. And so here's just a really quick pastoral application for us. We should never think that when we see somebody suffering, ah, that person must be suffering because they've done something wrong in their life. They must have some hidden sin that is unconfessed that they haven't repented of, and that's why they're suffering.

Job's teaching us it is not so simple as that. That's not how it works. Because Job isn't suffering because he's guilty of doing something wrong. That's God's verdict on him. He's actually suffering because God says he's blameless and upright, and God allows him to suffer. And so what Job, the book of Job is teaching us is the reality of undeserved or of innocent suffering. That's a thing.

[9 : 07] You can suffer not because you've done something wrong, but because your suffering is simply undeserved, and you're innocent, but you're still suffering. And his friends don't get this. And I think today, still people don't get this. And so Job is wrestling with this, and he responds with the matter of God's justice. And so moving on now to chapter 23, which we read, and chapter 24. What Job is longing for here is for God to be just. He wants justice for himself, but he also wants justice for the poor and needy.

And Job realizes his friends are a waste of time. He needs to deal with God. He needs to hear from God. God needs to speak. And so again, chapter 23, verse 3 and 4. If only I knew where to find him, if only I could go to his dwelling. I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments.

So Job, since he's innocent, is confident that if he meets God, God will vindicate him. Verse 7. Then the upright can establish their innocence before him, and there I would be delivered forever from my judge. But for Job, God seems absent. Verse 8, chapter 23. But if I go to the east, he 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. He feels that God is elusive. And that's what makes his suffering so painful. It's like he's banging on God's door, but God doesn't answer. And I wonder if you've ever felt that in your own life experience, where yes, the suffering is physical, emotional, perhaps mental suffering. And that's bad. But the worst is the pain of God's silence, where you cry out to God and there's no answer and nothing happens, nothing changes. But even though it felt like that for Job, that God wasn't there, Job knew that God was aware of what was going on. Look at verse 10.

But he knows the way that I take. When he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold. So get that, Job is certain that God knows his way. So Job doesn't know what God's way is with his life, but he

is sure, he's convinced that God knows what God's way is with Job's life. And so he trusts that after this test, after this suffering, he'll come forth as gold. Well, why? Verse 11 and 12 tell us of Job's faithfulness.

[12:09] Job has followed God's ways. Job has kept God's commands. And so he trusts that God knows exactly what he is doing. And that's what we all need to trust, isn't it? There is a God who is sovereign, who is loving, who is just, and he knows how to order his world, and he knows how to order the affairs of his people. Verse 13, but he stands alone and who can oppose him? He does whatever he pleases.

He does whatever he pleases. And because God works like this, Job's terrified. He's in awe of the sovereign God who does whatever he pleases. So look at verse 15 to 17, chapter 23. That is why I am terrified before him. When I think of all this, I fear him. God has made my heart faint. The Almighty has terrified me, yet I am not silenced by the darkness, by the thick darkness that covers my face. So there's no knowing for Job what God will do. And Job's whole life is testimony to this. In his suffering, he has been unaware of what God is doing with him. And so while he endures undeserved suffering, he's confused about God's justice because the wicked people in the world seem to prosper. And that's what makes God's justice a challenge for him. And Job wonders why God's judgment isn't more obvious. And so as we turn from 23 into chapter 24, Job is crying out to God to judge the wicked. So chapter 24, verse 1, why does the Almighty not set times for judgment? Why must those who know him look in vain for such days? So his question, even his complaint about God's justice is expanded upon in the rest of chapter 24 in his speech? Because he wants to know why God doesn't put more dates in his calendar for judging the wicked. It just doesn't seem to happen. Why doesn't he judge the wicked? Because we all want him to, don't we? Wickedness seems to reign. Evil seems to rage. And Job's saying, how come God is so indifferent to all of this? He doesn't seem to want to do anything about it. And so what Job does then is he gives some examples of this. So chapter 24, verse 2 to 17, in summary, Job says the wicked steal land. They steal other people's animals. Verse 2, they abuse the poor and needy. Verse 3 to 4, they're victims. The victims of the wicked. They struggle to eat and provide for their children. Verse 5 and 6. Verse 7, they don't have anything decent to wear, no clothing. Verse 8, they don't have homes to live in. Verse 9 to 11, the wicked abuse their power. They reduce people to poverty. And so the innocent are in debt to the wicked. The innocent lose their children. They end up working for the wicked. They work with crops, but they go hungry. They crush grapes, but they go thirsty.

[15:36] And Job concludes, hey, God just doesn't seem to care about any of this. Surely God seems to be turning a blind eye to all of this injustice because the wicked just seem to keep getting away with it. They keep on doing it. And so verse 12 of chapter 24, what does Job say?

The groans of the dying rise from the city, and the souls of the wounded cry out for help, but God charges no one with wrongdoing. Why does God just not bring his judgment? Zap, just like that, when somebody does something wrong. And Job says, verse 13 to 17, the wicked must be punished. And he uses light and darkness to emphasize their crimes. So he mentions the murderer. He mentions the adulterer.

He mentions the thief. And he says they all do their work at night. They think nobody will see them. And they seem to get away with it. And Job can't understand it. He is perplexed.

But what he says next in verse 18 to 25 of chapter 24 sounds really strange. Because here, what Job does is he describes judgment of the wicked, which is kind of the opposite of what he's just said.

And it's puzzling because Job now sounds like his friends. And so, of course, God will ultimately bring judgment and punish the wicked. But it doesn't happen in this kind of tit-for-tat retribution kind of fashion. That's not how God works, which is what the friends are suggesting.

[17:22] And so, verse 23 and 24, we read, He may let them rest in a feeling of security, but his eyes are on their ways. For a little while, they are exalted, and then they are gone. They are brought low and gathered up like all others.

They are cut off like ears of corn. Hear what Job is saying? He's saying the wicked may get away with their evil deeds in this life, but in the end, they will be punished. And so, Job's coming to understand God's justice in a much deeper, more profound way. And Job's life proved the truth of what he is saying. Verse 25, if this is not so, who can prove me false and reduce my words to nothing?

So, he's saying we won't necessarily see justice happen in this lifetime, in this world, for all those who are wicked and evil. Because we see that good people do suffer, and wicked people do get away with their wickedness. But what we learn from Job is that the almighty, all-wise God does allow wickedness. He does allow suffering in his purposes for this world, but also in our lives. And then the argument moves on to chapter 25, and Bildad speaks, and this is the last we hear of Job's friends.

And Bildad simply makes one point there in verse 4. How then can a mortal be righteous before God? How can one born of woman be pure? He's saying a righteous, a person cannot be righteous before God.

And he reaffirms that God is sovereign, God's in charge. Verse 2, dominion and all belong to God. He establishes order in the heights of heaven. So, God is in complete control. He's saying God cannot be challenged. So, in a sense, he's right. His theology is orthodox. But his question, verse 4, how then can a mortal be righteous before God, is a question that's been asked before, because it is a good question. Asked twice by Elipaz and also by Job. And so, he's saying that it's absurd and it's arrogant for Job to think that he can be considered righteous before God. And he's right. Bildad is right, but he is also wrong, as we'll see. And that's why Job, unlike Bildad, has something to hope for. He clings to the hope that one day an arbiter or a mediator that Job has already mentioned will make this possible, that an unrighteous person will be able to be near God and made righteous in God's presence. And so, this is the last we hear of Job's friends. And Bildad's perspective is bleak and hopeless. Look at verse 6. How much less a mortal who is but a maggot, a human being who is only a worm. Hear what he's saying? Human beings are just like worms. They're just like maggots. Now, go and have a good day tomorrow with your family, knowing that you are a worm and a maggot. But he's wrong, of course, isn't he? Because he places no value or dignity on human beings who are made in the image of God. And so, it's no wonder that God expresses his anger at Job's miserable comforters at the end of the book, because they've been way off the mark. They've been wrong on their value of people, including Job, and they've been wrong in their understanding of God. Their answers have been too simplistic. They haven't grasped the depths of Job's pain and suffering. And so, Job replies here in chapter 26 and 27. And Job's emphasis, when you read through these chapters, is that God's ways are simply majestic, and they're also mysterious. But before Job gets on to God, what he does is he rebukes his friends because their counsel has been worthless. I love his sarcasm at the beginning of chapter 26.

[21 : 49] He says, how have you helped the powerless? How have you saved the arm that is feeble? What advice have you offered to one without wisdom? And what great insight have you displayed? Who has helped you utter these words, and whose spirit spoke from your mouth? Job's friends were wrong about God. And so, Job now has to step up and describe God's ways. And he does that in verse 5 to 14 of chapter 26. And what he's saying here is that there is so much about God's work that's hidden from us. Look at verse 5 and 6, chapter 26.

The dead are in deep anguish, those beneath the waters and all that live in them. The realm of the dead is naked before God. Destruction lies uncovered. He's saying that we can't see the afterlife, but God sees everything. And so, Job goes on to speak of God's power in creation. And so, from verse 7 onwards, it's like he sings a hymn of praise to God, outlining how God puts this earth in its place.

Verse 7, he spreads out the northern skies over the empty space. He suspends the earth over nothing. Imagine that, suspending the earth over nothing. I tried to put a picture up in the wall yesterday, how I wish it would suspend over nothing. There's a lot more difficult than that, isn't it? And that's just a picture. But look at this description of God's great power. Verse 8, he fills the clouds with water. Verse 9, he covers over the moon. Simple. Verse 10, he orders the creation around. Verse 11 to 13, he controls every single bit of it. It's a breathtaking summary of God's power and control. And so, Job is working out as he wrestles with his suffering. God is so powerful, but he's got all of this in control.

The universe, the stars, the planets, this earth, life, death, what happens after. God has got it all under his control. And so, surely then, my little life, my circumstances, even my suffering, God knows what he is doing with it. Because he is a good God. He is a powerful God. And so, Job rounds off in verse 14, chapter 26, and these are but the outer fringe of his works. How faint the whisper we hear of him. Who then can understand the thunder of his power? Hear what Job's saying? God is far greater than our minds can simply comprehend. God outstrips all of our thoughts

about him. He is, as the Westminster Shorter catechism reminds us, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. And so, there is no end to our understanding or growing to know who God is and what God is like. And it's this realization that God is so much greater than this universe, this world, my life, my mind, my thoughts, that he knows what he's about. He knows what he is doing.

And it helps Job in our suffering. And it can surely help us in our suffering too. And so, Job, he moves from this great sovereign picture he's painted of God back to God's justice again because he's wrestling with this great tension as he tries to make sense of his suffering. And so, chapter 27, verse 2, as surely as God lives who has denied me justice, the Almighty who has made my life bitter. So, God, yes, you're sovereign, but my life is bitter. You have denied me justice. And he defends his integrity by maintaining his innocence before God. And then what he does is he criticizes his friends and actually uses their words against them in verse 7 to 23 of chapter 27. Because he's saying that guys, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, you're being wicked. You are unjust here. And what Job does is he praise for God's judgment on them? And so, he says, verse 11 and 12, chapter 27,

[26 : 30] I will teach you about the power of God, the ways of the Almighty I will not conceal. You have all seen this yourselves. Why then this meaningless talk? He's going to teach them about God and flip their accusations that he is wicked back on them as they place themselves in danger of God's judgment.

Verse 13, here is the faith God allots to the wicked, the heritage a ruthless man receives from the Almighty. Job describes God's judgment on them in similar terms to how they said God judges the wicked. How? Well, with starving children, with destitute widows, with the loss of property and wealth, as well as just being completely overcome by the terrors of nature. And it's a brutal description.

So much so that some people think these words can't really be the words of Job, can they? They must be the words of Job's friends. But I think this is Job's warning to his friends at the end of this cycle of speeches. Because in setting themselves up against Job and getting Job wrong, then they got God wrong.

And so in a sense, they're in danger of setting themselves up against God. In which case, the very punishment they're so confident that God has for the wicked will be the punishment that God inflicts on them. And so Job is warning his friends. Suffering is perplexing for them, for us. And so first, the problem of suffering. Second, the perplexity of suffering. And then third, the purpose of suffering. And as we apply all of this, I guess the real question is, can there or is there ever a purpose to suffering? Is there a purpose behind it? Can there be reasons for it? Because that's what the book of Job confronts us with, isn't it? That's what we've been looking at all of these weeks. And that's why Job has this long, heated debate with his three friends. His friends think Job suffers, because he's done something wrong. But their simple solution is wrong. Because we know Job is an innocent sufferer. And so he tried to make sense of what he understands about God with his life experience of suffering. And he's wrestling with, if this is who God is, then why is my life like this?

[29 : 07] And he's wrestling and wrestling and trying to make sense of it. He's crying out to God for help. He's longing for God to answer. But no response comes to Job. And that is the problem of suffering, isn't it?

That's what makes suffering so perplexing. And yet the book of Job teaches us that doesn't mean that suffering is suffering is without purpose. Listen to Malcolm Muggeridge, who was a journalist and author. He's dead now. But in his book, *A 20th Century Testimony* about his life, he said this, *Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my 75 years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence has been through affliction and not through happiness. And that experience is not unique, is it? That we learn and we grow, not when things are easy, but often when things are really difficult. And that's why the long and extensive treatment on suffering in the book of Job helps us get a better perspective on suffering and its place in our lives. Now, of course, we try our best to keep suffering at bay. Nobody wants to suffer. We don't go looking for it. And yet we know we can't avoid it forever. Like you may be suffering right now, and if you aren't, good. But you know suffering will come at some point in your life. Many of us are experiencing suffering right now, perhaps with our health, perhaps with our relationships and our families or whatever else. And*

so when it comes, when suffering comes, we need more than just our personal understanding. We need more than just our individual strength. We need more than my ability. We need more than the resources that I have or I can muster will give to me in the face of suffering. We need more. Because when suffering comes, we discover, often the hard way, that we're not really in control of our lives. And when we think about it, we never were in control of our lives. And suffering teaches us that. And everything won't always be neat or easy or straightforward when it comes to God and how he works in our lives. But what we learn from Job is that, well, we can't put God in a box like Job's friends did. We can't say, God will work like this, or that's happening to you because of this. It is not as neat and simple, as easy as that. Because there will be times, and Job teaches us this, there will be times when we just can't figure it all out. And yet the book of Job assures us that God knows what he's doing even when we don't. Which means we can only really echo Job's words that come in chapter 23, verse 10.

Remember what he said? But he knows the way that I take. He knows the way that I take. And that might sound like a bit of a cop-out for an answer to the question, why? Or why does God allow this suffering?

Because it doesn't seem very satisfying, does it? But just think of parents and the relationship that they have with their small children. Small children just can't understand most of what their mum and dad allow for them or disallow for them. And yes, small children will ask questions and they will question why. And yet there's no way they can fully comprehend their parents' reasons why. And yet despite this not understanding, children are capable of knowing that their parents love them. And so, well, they can trust their mum, they can trust their dad. And that really is all they need to know, right? In fact, that's the most important thing for a child to know, that their parent loves them and they can be trusted. And so, the difference between the almighty God and human beings is infinitely greater, isn't it, than the difference between a parent and a small child. And so, it shouldn't be surprising that we are not able to grasp all of God's work in our lives. Or the reasons why some things happen and other things don't happen. But through the good news of Jesus Christ, we can know that God loves us. And that's what we need the most, especially when we're suffering.

[34 : 26] Because we can fully trust God without fully understanding why. And just because we can't understand a reason why in our finite, small brains, and they are small, just because we can't understand a reason why that doesn't mean there can't be one. God never explains the reason why he allowed Job to suffer to Job. We know Job didn't know. And yet, Job emerges from his suffering with a greater understanding of God and of God's ways and a stronger relationship with God.

And so, as problematic and as perplexing as it is, there is a purpose behind suffering. And this unavoidable part of our human experience can only make sense by understanding our relationship with God. And so, if you're asking, why is there suffering in my life? Or wondering why a loved one is going through a painful time? Do you know what the answer isn't? It isn't turning away from God. But turning towards God in your suffering is the best thing that you can do. Because God loves you. And so, growing closer to God rather than moving further away from Him is what you need to do. Because it's what we all need to do. Well, how does this happen? Well, only by realizing and resting in what Jesus Christ has done for us. Because Jesus is the true and better Job. He's the perfectly innocent sufferer. And so, while Job couldn't understand his suffering, Jesus knew the way he had to take.

In God's purposes, it was the way of ultimate suffering and death on a cross. And it was for us, people like you and me. And so, Bildad was right about one thing. A person cannot be righteous before God. That's true. We're all guilty of sin. And so, God in His justice must punish us. And yet, God in His love wants to forgive us. And so, the good news of Christianity is that I am so flawed that Jesus Christ had to die for me. And yet, I am so loved that Jesus Christ was glad to die for me.

[37 : 03] And so, when Jesus died, He conquered sin and death. Sin is what causes suffering. And one day, Jesus will restore everything to His intended perfect state. And only then will we understand why. And so, until then, keep walking with God through your pain and suffering. Because if God was working through the ultimate suffering on the cross to accomplish His great purposes for our salvation, then we can trust that God is also working in our suffering to accomplish His purposes for our lives.

And when you know God's love and how nothing can ultimately harm you, even death itself, because you know you're heading towards paradise to be with Him forever, when you know that, then you know He's with you now. And He'll always be with you, come what may He is.
Amen. Amen.