

Why does God allow suffering?

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[0 : 00] Well, whenever there is suffering, the question why is often asked, even why does God allow suffering?! And it's a question that has always vexed human beings because suffering is sadly part of our human experience.

It is both a philosophical problem and it is a personal problem. It challenges us intellectually and it challenges us emotionally.

And so whether we are thinking about suffering in this world or we're thinking about our own personal suffering, we can't escape the reality of suffering.

And that's why the book of Job is for all of us, whether we call ourselves a believer or we are an unbeliever. Because it helps us better understand suffering.

Now, I've been in ministry for a long time. I know I don't look old enough, but I've been a minister for a long time that I've recognized that suffering is, if not one of the biggest barriers, it is the biggest barrier to believing in God.

[1 : 09] How can a good God allow evil and suffering? Skeptics will ask. And yet at the same time, I've also discovered that suffering is actually one of the reasons that people come to believe in God.

Where suffering has the effect, not of pushing people further away from God, but suffering in their lives has the effect of drawing them closer to God. They find God through suffering.

As we've called our series in the book of Job, finding God through suffering. Because Job is not simply a book about suffering. Ultimately, it is a book about God and how knowing God enables us to make sense of suffering in this world, but also in our lives.

And it also gives us real hope in suffering. But as we read the book of Job together, and you'll have noticed this already, Job doesn't give us simplistic answers.

There is no quick fix to pain and suffering. Suffering is never easy. Easy. And that's why it's hardly surprising that Job is such a long and such a complex book.

[2 : 21] Because Job tackles the problem of suffering head on, as Job wrestles with the unhelpful answers to suffering, and the unhelpful answers to suffering, and helps us see that there is hope in God in our suffering.

Troop helps us understand suffering with a far better and much more hopeful perspective. And it teaches us how the Christian faith helps us make best sense of suffering.

In a way that no other faith, no other religion, no other philosophy, or no other worldview can help us understand suffering. Because, you know, that suffering is not just a problem for people who do believe in God.

Suffering is an even bigger problem for people who don't believe in God. And so God gives us a hope that can sustain us through suffering, because it is grounded in the good news of Jesus Christ.

And so today our focus is on chapters 1 and 2 in Job, where we'll see three things. We'll set the scene, we'll study the story, and then we'll survey the suffering.

[3 : 35] So first of all, set the scene. The book of Job is part of the wisdom literature of the Bible, and so its purpose is to make us wise. And becoming wise doesn't happen overnight, does it?

It is a lifelong pursuit. And so Job is teaching us that God uses suffering in this process of making us wise. Now, Job can be a really difficult book to read and to interpret, and that's partly because most of Job, if you've read it, you'll know it's mostly poetry.

If you've never read it before, you'll discover that Job speaks, his friends speak in a poetic fashion. Now, chapters 1 and 2, which we've just read, chapters 1 and 2 is prose, and then it's all poetry until we get to the end, the epilogue in chapter 42, when it becomes prose again.

So prose, poetry, then prose. The structure, basically, the book begins with a dialogue between God and Satan. We've seen that. And then it turns to a very long dialogue between Job and his friends.

And then at the end, there's a dialogue between God and Job. And so it's not simple or easy, but then suffering never is, is it?

[4 : 51] But we'll never make sense of suffering without learning what Job teaches. In fact, there's no other book in the Bible, or indeed no other work of literature that has ever been written, that tackles the problem of suffering with as much rigor and realism as the book of Job.

There is philosophical rigor here that will stretch our minds, but there is also personal realism that will touch our emotions as we watch and read of Job's suffering.

And so it gives a finely balanced approach to help us answer the question, why does God allow suffering? Job is for our heads, but also for our hearts.

And so as we set the scene today, the first five verses of chapter 1 introduce Job to us. Notice the emphasis here is on Job's character and four aspects of it.

First, Job is blameless. It doesn't mean that he was perfect or sinless, but Job was a man of integrity. Second, Job is upright, so he treated people in the right way with justice.

[6 : 11] Third, Job feared God, so he revered God. He sought to live his life in obedience to God. And then fourthly, Job shunned evil, so he turned away from evil.

He repented of his sin, just as any believer, true believer in God, should do. And so we've got this fourfold description of Job's character, and it's significant, because you'll notice the writer uses the same description three times.

So it's there, Job chapter 1, verse 1. It's there, chapter 1, verse 8. And it's there, chapter 2, verse 3. And so obviously, it's important that we get what Job was like.

We need to know this. It actually helps us grasp the purpose of the book, because what these verses are emphasizing in their repetition is that Job is an innocent sufferer.

So Job's not suffering because of his sin, which his friends think. Job is a faithful believer. Notice that God calls him, in chapter 1, verse 8, my servant Job.

[7 : 22] He says it again in chapter 2, verse 3, my servant Job. So the emphasis from the writer, from God himself, is that Job is a true believer.

And so at the start of the book of Job, this fact is a bit like a marker for us. And then at the end of the book of Job, spoiler alert, Job is also described as a true believer.

And so at the beginning, and then at the end, we're told that Job is a true believer in God. And so we've got to read the rest of the book in the middle, in the light of these two bookends.

So that's Job's character. Next, we get a description of Job's prosperity. There in verse 2 and 3, Job's children were a sign of God's blessing. He had lots of them.

His livestock was a sign of his prosperity. We're told that he was the greatest man among all the people of the East. And then Job's godly character is seen in the sacrifices that he makes on behalf of his children in verse 4 and 5.

[8 : 27] So here is Job. He's godly. He's great. He's wealthy. He's wise. He lives in this land called Uz. Nobody knows exactly where Uz was, but it doesn't seem to have been in Israel.

And we don't know exactly when Job lived either. He's mentioned in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel for his righteousness, and he's mentioned in the New Testament letter of James for his perseverance.

So Job is emphatically a true believer. Job is a genuine worshiper of God. We're meant to get that. And yet he suffers in a way that is both painful and perplexing for him.

But as he articulates this in poetic fashion, we see how his suffering not only challenges his faith in God, but his suffering actually deepens his faith in God.

Taylor Swift, in introducing her album, The Tortured Poets Department, says this. She says, And isn't that true?

[9 : 44] That poetry helps us express how we're feeling. And that is part of the beauty of the book of Job. I said it was mostly poetry. And Job, in his words, is brutally honest about his suffering.

His poetry is sad. Of course it's sad. But as he expresses himself, he comes to a far deeper and richer understanding of God and his ways, which is what ultimately helps him cope with his suffering and helps us, too, deal with our suffering.

So we've set the scene, first of all. Secondly, let's study this story. So Job is overtaken by this series of tragic events, and he loses everything.

He loses his wealth. He loses his family. And he loses his health. Well, why? As the reader, we know why. But Job doesn't. Chapters 1 and 2 give us a glimpse of what happened behind the scenes that result in Job's suffering.

And so in chapter 1, we move from heaven to earth. Two scenes. And then in chapter 2, we move again from heaven to earth. Another two scenes.

[10:56] So we're taken from the heavenly court, which is where we discover how God rules this world and understand a bit of how God is in control of everything.

And then we're taken to earth to see how this all plays out. And so if you look at verse 6 and verse 7, there's the heavenly court, and this is God's domain where the angels and Satan come, and they present themselves before God.

We're not told why we've got this heavenly court, what Satan is doing there, or even why God interacts with Satan and even speaks to him. We don't know.

Literally, he is called the Satan. So it's a title rather than a personal name. It means something like adversary, opponent, enemy. And we know that from the rest of the Bible.

And it basically describes his hostility towards God. But rather than speculate about what we're not told, these scenes in the heavenly courtroom tell us about Job's suffering and God's relationship to suffering.

[12:05] Because the events on earth take place, you'll note, as a result of the discussions and the decisions in heaven.

So verse 8, 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.

God tells Satan to consider Job. And so despite the high regard that God has for Job, he's his servant, remember, it's this question that leads to Job's suffering.

God assured Satan that Job was a true believer. But Satan challenges this in verse 9 to 11. He says, Does Job fear God for nothing?

And Satan's question is an important one because he taunts God by saying, Yeah, God, Job only fears you because you've been good to him. He's only in it for the benefits.

[13:10] But take them away and it will be a different story. And so Satan accuses God of putting a hedge around Job, of protecting him. And what Satan is doing here is he is attacking God and he wants to use Job to get to God because Job is the best servant that God has.

And so Job's sufferings won't just test Job, they'll test God to see whether God has created people who will love God for himself rather than just for the benefits that God gives.

Like, would Job still trust God? When his wealth and his prosperity were taken away. That's the issue. And I think Satan has pretty much nailed it for how many people relate to God, where God is loved for what he can give them rather than loved for himself.

Just think about our human relationships. We're often only interested in people for what they can give to us. And this happens at any kind of networking event or any kind of social situation.

And you've probably noticed this if you've been to any work networking occasions where people can work the room really well to make sure they connect with the people who will benefit them.

[14:35] And they ignore everybody else. Right? You know, you've been there. They're not interested in people who can't do anything for them, only for what they can give. And it happens in all walks of life.

You see this when it comes to power or money or sex. A person is useful for as long as they can provide these things. But when they fail to deliver these things, then they're simply dropped.

And this is the challenge raised at the start of Job. Because it's actually at the heart of the book of Job. Will Job love God for himself or for the blessings he gives?

That's the test. And it must be proved to Satan that Job doesn't fear God simply because God has blessed him. And the proof would come through the sufferings of Job.

God would allow it, allow Job to suffer, to show Satan and all Job's readers that Job loved God for himself.

[15:38] And so this is a test for us, isn't it? Do we love God simply because he's God? And do we continue to love God even when life doesn't go well, even when we are suffering?

Because for Job, or for us, it will test just how genuine our faith in God really is. And so here Satan gives, is given permission by God to test Job.

Look at verse 12. 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. God says, Satan may make Job suffer.

And then the scene switches from the heavenly court down to earth, and Job is struck with all of this terrible suffering. And the story is told in such a way as to highlight the relentless nature of the attacks on Job with this repeated phrase, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you.

So first, Job's oxen and donkeys are stolen, then his servants are killed, then a fire killed his sheep and their shepherds, then his camels are stolen, and then more servants are killed.

[16 : 55] And if this wasn't bad enough, the next blow is that all of God's, all of Job's children die in a freak storm. So human evil followed by natural disaster, followed by more human evil, followed by more natural disaster, just wiped out everything that Job had.

He goes from riches to rags in one day, left bankrupt and bereft. And we're meant to feel the trauma and the tragedy of this scene of what Job's life has become.

And yet, check out God's, sorry, check out Job's response again. Verse 20 and 22. At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground in worship and said, naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I shall depart.

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. Job is devastated and yet he turns to God in worship. He doesn't suppress his grief. His pain is real. He feels it. But in the pain, he praises God. Now you remember how Satan had said Job would curse God if he had everything taken away from him.

[18 : 18] But it's the exact opposite that happens. Job doesn't curse God. He falls to the ground in worship instead. So his suffering doesn't drive him further away from God.

His suffering drives him to God instead. So Job is tested and his relationship with God was proven to be genuine. So the first round goes to God, as it were.

And yet, Satan doesn't give up and the action switches back to the heavenly court at the beginning of chapter 2. And again, we get to be flies on the wall as we watch this heavenly committee meeting between God and Satan and the angels who are around.

And it all echoes chapter 1. So verse 3, 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.

So Satan is not convinced about how genuine Job's faith in God really is. And so he wants to crank up the suffering to another level. Satan wants this time to make Job suffer physically, suggesting that this is really going to test his love for God.

[19 : 38] And surprisingly, God again grants Satan permission. Verse 6, the Lord said to Satan, very well then, he is in your hands, but you must spare his life.

And so Satan has allowed this free reign, but on the condition he can't kill Job. As you think about it, Job's life being spared is integral to this test because there would be no point in Job's suffering and ending up dead.

It would prove nothing. And yet for Job, he is oblivious to all of this. He is only the man who is suffering.

And so in verse 7 to 8, we read about his suffering and we don't know the nature of his affliction, but it's awful. So Job had lost everything and now he's tormented by pain and next his wife basically tells him to wise up and to curse God and to die.

His wife said to him, verse 9, are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die. Notice that his wife responds in the way that Satan hoped Job would respond, which is by cursing God.

[20 : 53] And so Job rebukes her. Verse 10, he replied, you are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God and not trouble? In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.

So Job had lost everything, including his health. But this tragic scene ends with Job's faith intact. He doesn't sin with his lips, which is what Satan expected. He maintained his trust in God. And again, Job passes the test.

And so not only does the second round go to God, in fact, the contest is won by God. The trial is concluded. There is a result. And yet part of the mystery of the book of Job and part of the mystery of suffering is that God is silent.

God is silent in the book from this point on until he speaks again at the end. And another spoiler, Job is vindicated by God.

[22 : 00] But in the meantime, here we are and Job is battered, he's bruised, he is a broken believer, he is suffering in the extreme. And then our reading in the end of chapter 2, it concludes by introducing Job's friends to us.

And so as we set the scene for the book of Job and as we study the story, we can see that neither Job nor his friends can understand what is going on.

They're on earth, they don't know what's being said, what's been said in heaven, but we do as we read. And so Job was suffering as a test of his devotion to God.

That's what we see from the story. So thirdly and finally, let's survey the suffering. Set the scene, study the story, survey the suffering. I'd like us really just to explore why God allows suffering.

And we'll see that more deeply through this whole series. But as we survey the suffering here in chapter 1 and in chapter 2, I'd like to highlight three important truths that we must learn in order to better understand why God allows suffering.

[23 : 20] And the first truth is that Job is an innocent sufferer. In other words, innocent suffering in this world is a thing.

Three times, remember, we're told Job is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And so this is important. Job isn't suffering because he is wicked.

Job isn't suffering because he has committed some terrible sin. Yes, Job is a sinner like everybody is a sinner, but that's not why Job was suffering.

Now, some suffering can obviously be the direct result of sin. If you steal from work and you're caught and you're sacked or you go to jail, you're suffering because of your sin.

So Job was suffering, but not because he'd done anything wrong. In fact, the story tells us it's the opposite. And of course, we should know that all suffering in this world is a consequence of the fall of our broken relationship with God, which means there will always be suffering until the day that Jesus Christ returns and brings in a perfected new creation.

[24 : 34] We'll still always suffer until then. But the book of Job is telling us there is such a thing as innocent suffering. And that's why Job is so perplexed about it and why we can be perplexed about it too.

Remember, Job knew nothing about these discussions in the heavenly court. All he knew was, I'm suffering, but not why.

Well, it should tell us that we won't always know why we're suffering. Our suffering and the reason why will often remain hidden from us.

And yet, this doesn't stop Job grappling with God. In fact, it's his grappling, his wrestling, his questioning of God and his ways that helps Job come to a greater understanding in the end.

And so, as we listen to Job's pain and his perplexity, let's remember that Job is speaking as a believer. He trusts in God.

[25 : 43] He's not an unbeliever who is ranting and raging at God. He's a believer who is trying his best to make sense of it all. And interestingly, when you read all the way through the book of Job, Job never actually gets an explanation for his suffering.

And yet, Job goes down in history as someone who trusted God through his suffering. And Job has helped hundreds of millions of people after him because of how he dealt with his suffering, because he emerges from it with a greater understanding of God and his ways.

So that's the first truth. Job is an innocent sufferer. The second truth is that Satan is powerful. Satan attacks Job to get at God, and so his motivation is evil, and he doesn't care how much Job will suffer.

But we've got to avoid two opposite extremes when it comes to Satan, because we can't play down the work of Satan. It is real, it is powerful, it does play out in our lives, but at the same time we must also avoid playing up the work of Satan by thinking his powers got no limits.

Because in Job, God gives Satan permission, and God also puts limits on what Satan can do. It's like God has him on a leash, like I've got a leash for our dog, Poppy, so I'm still in control, even if she thinks she is, I'm holding her.

[27 : 26] And so Satan is allowed to go so far, but no further. And that's the dynamic that we see operating in the heavenly court scenes, which should help us make more sense, not only of Job's suffering, but of ours too.

And so Satan here is no minor character, but he isn't the main character, because Job chapter 1 and chapter 2 is part of this conflict that you read all the way through the Bible between God and the devil, God and Satan.

And while Jesus defeated Satan on the cross, that doesn't stop Satan continuing to attack God and his people.

And the reality is, from the book of Job, that God permits this. He allows it. He has a purpose in it. And so having said this, we have to emphasize thirdly, well firstly, Job is an innocent sufferer.

Secondly, Satan is powerful, but thirdly, God is in charge. And you'll notice how clear this is from every single detail in this narrative in Job chapters 1 and chapters 2.

[28 : 41] God is in control. God presides over the heavenly court. He asks the questions. He gives the permissions. He sets the limits. He is in supreme control.

And so God allowed Job to suffer. But it was to accomplish the very opposite of what Satan wanted to accomplish.

In other words, God gave Satan enough rope with which to hang himself. And so the challenge of the book of Job is understanding that the sovereign God does allow suffering to achieve his purposes.

Now you may be asking, as we often do, does this mean that God is the one who inflicts pain and suffering? So when there's suffering like perhaps the death of a baby or the terminal cancer of a young husband and father or the abuse of a spouse or a natural disaster or genocide or an earthquake or whatever it is, are we meant to assume that God is behind all of this?

Well, that's not how Job presents it, is it? Because while God is in charge, the book of Job doesn't depict God as the one causing Job to suffer.

[30 : 03] It is Satan who inflicts Job. And God takes no pleasure in seeing people suffer. And so when it comes to suffering, there are no simplistic answers, as we'll see.

And so while the book of Job is really clear to state the very real problem and nature of suffering, it also tells us that God in his wisdom uses it for greater good, even if we don't see it or understand why at the time.

And so as we close, as we learn about God and his ways when it comes to suffering through Job's innocent suffering, well, we discover that Job foreshadows the ultimate innocent sufferer, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because centuries after Job, Satan attacked the perfectly innocent sufferer and tried to turn him against God by testing him in the wilderness.

And Jesus, who was fully blameless and fully upright and fully shunned evil and feared God, went much further in his suffering than Job ever did.

[31 : 23] While Job lost his wealth, his family, his health, Jesus lost his life. When Job suffered, his life was spared. But when Jesus suffered, his life was lost.

Job may have felt that God had abandoned him when he hadn't. But Jesus was abandoned by God. That's why Jesus cried out from the cross, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Because Jesus suffered the greatest suffering possible as the anger of God at sin was poured out on him as he hung on the cross.

Why? Well, so that we need never have God's anger at our sin poured out on us. For failing to love God for who he is, for loving all the good things that God gives in this life and in this world, instead of loving the creator who blesses us with them.

And so the question of why does God allow suffering can only fully, really, truly be answered in the light of the death of Jesus on the cross.

[32 : 38] Jesus died to save us from the greatest suffering of all, which is an eternity in hell, separated from God forever.

He saved us from that when our faith is in him. And so it's also through Jesus' suffering and death that Satan has been defeated. Where just as Satan's attacks on Job only managed to achieve God's purposes, so Satan's attacks on Jesus and Jesus' death only managed to accomplish God's great salvation plan.

And it's only as we grasp this that we'll manage to make sense of suffering in our lives and in this world. Because when we realize the extent of God's love for us in Jesus Christ, then it changes our perspective on everything, on life and on death, even on suffering.

And it causes us to love God for himself, not simply for what we can get, not just for a good life. And so if we are suffering, if you are suffering and you don't know why, well, whatever the reason, it can't be because God doesn't love you.

The story of Job's suffering is a shadow of the reality of God's suffering in Jesus Christ. Because he was prepared to suffer and die for you then, well, you can be sure that he will never abandon you now.

[34 : 23] He did not suffer so that we would never suffer. But when we do suffer, we actually become more like the person he wants us to be.

Amen. Let's pray together. together.