

I Choose to Bless: Suffering, Sovereignty and a Man Named Job

The Reverence and Relevance of Job

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13 Now there was a day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, 14 and there came a messenger to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them, 15 and the Sabeans fell upon them and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you." 16 While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them, and I alone have escaped to tell you." 17 While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "The Chaldeans formed three groups and made a raid on the camels and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you." 18 While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, 19 and behold, a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead, and I alone have escaped to tell you. 20 Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. 21 And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." 22 In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong (Job 1:13-22)

Suffering is personal. It creates emotions and pain that are often beyond belief. Suffering is perplexing. It doesn't make sense and, at times, seems so random. Suffering is a paradox. It leaves things in tension, and it asks more questions than it answers. Suffering, like nothing else in life, is a convergence of these loaded three words: personal, perplexing, and paradox.

The "Who?" Question

In February 2003 I had just finished listening to a biographical message on the hard life of Adoniram Judson, and my heart was broken. I remember sitting in the auditorium weeping and saying, "Lord, I have no idea what it means to suffer or even how to suffer." That began a year-long study on the subject which I now see as part of God's preparatory work in my life.

In February 2004 I was sound asleep when my wife woke me up in the early morning to tell me that she hadn't felt our baby move inside her womb all night. As she went to take a shower, I fell to my knees beside my bed and I said, "Lord, please I don't want to suffer this way." Most of you know our story, but on February 17th our stillborn daughter Sylvia was born. Her stillbirth, the struggle to conceive a child, and the birth of Savannah were some of the most difficult experiences of our lives. It was filled with innumerable paradoxes, perplexing questions, mysterious purpose, and deep personal pain.

And yet it was also one of the most formative moments in our lives. We learned how to live in a paradox of pain beyond belief and divine sovereignty beyond comprehension. We learned to eclipse perplexing questions with trust rooted in the Scriptures. We learned that there is no pain too great that God cannot heal. And we also learned that the mysterious purposes of suffering are not solved by asking why? But who?

Now I am not an expert on suffering; I still have many more questions than I have answers. Further, there are many people who have suffered much more than I have. But what I do know is this: When it comes to suffering, the answer to the Who question is far more helpful than the why question.

William Cowper (1731-1800) captured this so well in his hymn "God Moves in Mysterious Ways"

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence,
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain;
God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain.

The answer to the Who question as the ground of steadfastness in suffering is the point of the book of Job. Today we begin the first of seven messages under the title "Suffering, Sovereignty, and a man named Job." And my prayer is that you will come to see that when it comes to suffering, Who? is far more satisfying than why?

Why This Book Now?

I have not chosen a study of this book lightly. After all, Job is a massive (42 chapters) and complicated book with tough challenges and profound truths dealing with the knotty subject of suffering. But in spite of those challenges, it is a book that we need. Here's why:

1. Suffering is a common human experience. Everyone experiences some degree of hardship, sorrow, difficulty, or pain. Jesus even promised it – "In the world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33). And the reason that we will experience suffering is because of the

simple fact that we live in a sinful and fallen world. The presence of evil guarantees the suffering at many levels.

2. Suffering well is a direct application of the message of Colossians. Jesus is the core. He is pre-eminent in everything (Col 1:17). This was the truth that we celebrated and sang. In other words, he is sovereign; he's in control over everything – including suffering, evil, and all pain. And there is no other time in life that the pre-eminence and sovereignty of Jesus matters more than when it comes to suffering. To believe in the pre-eminence of Jesus means that He is Lord, and I am not. Therefore, the fundamental position of my life must be submission to His will. Or let me ask it this way: "Does God have a right to do something that is hard, painful, or confusing in your life?" It is one thing to state an allegiance to the pre-eminence of Jesus; it is another to cling to it with joy in the midst of great and confusing pain.

3. Suffering tests our belief and faith. Perplexing pain creates very difficult questions and powerful emotions. Suffering, like nothing else, tests the substance of what we believe to be true and our willingness to live by faith. James 1:2 calls believers in Jesus to count it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds. Unfortunately that often seems light years away from where we live. There are many examples of people whose belief and faith collapsed under the weight of suffering – from the person who describes him or herself as "angry with God", and others who have completely abandoned their faith because they "cannot love a God who allows such evil to exist." My urgent goal in this series is to help you stand strong in sorrow. It is my job, as your pastor, to teach you how to suffer – to strengthen the infrastructure of your faith – so that when suffering comes, you will know how think and what to do. So the time to think about suffering is before it comes.

Job is the most important book in the Bible on the subject of suffering, and I hope that this series will create some new categories, challenge some deeply held but incorrect beliefs, and, in the end, help you learn how to say with Job "the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). My aim is to have learn how to say, "I choose to bless" in the midst of the darkest day of your life.

An Overview of Job

The book of Job is shrouded in much mystery. There is no clear author, date, or location for the writing of the book. Even the meaning of name "Job" is uncertain. It could mean enemy, perhaps for how he feels about his relationship with God, or it could mean "where is my father?"¹ However, we do know that Job was not an Israelite, and that the book makes no reference to the people of Israel at all. The hero of the book is described in 1:1 as "a man in the land of Uz...{who} was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil."

¹ ESV Study Bible – Introduction to Job, p. 869.

However, the book is not completely without some clues. It is likely that a Hebrew sage wrote the book since the author is clearly as well educated person and quotes directly or indirectly from the Hebrew Scriptures (see Job 7:17-18; Job 12:21,24). Further, the purpose of the book is clear. Its aim is to make a clear case for God's righteousness in the midst of innocent suffering. Through the use of both prose and poetry, the author highlights the value of faith in God despite difficult and unanswerable questions.

Job is a challenging book, and it is helpful to understand that overarching plot line. Let me give you a very brief overview of this book so that you can see the flow and the development of the message.

Testing a Righteous Man (1:1-2:10)

The book begins with a narrative that introduces us to two scenes. One scene is on earth where Job is introduced as a righteous and wealthy man (1:1-5). The other scene is heaven where the reader is brought into a combative conversation between Satan and God where Satan challenges Job's faithfulness as nothing more than a response to God's blessing upon him (1:6-19). The result is that God grants Satan permission to inflict tragedy after tragedy upon Job. His response is amazing: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21). The reader knows what is behind the story, but Job does not. He is an innocent and righteous man who has no idea why he is suffering.

Tough Questions and Unhelpful Friends (3:1-37:24)

The bulk of the book of Job is the poetic dialogue between Job and his friends who come to comfort him. The friends attempt to make sense of Job's suffering by suggesting that Job must have sinned to have received such pain. There are three cycles of speeches (#1 – 4:1-14:22, #2 – 15:1-21:34, #3 – 22:1-25:6) which attempt to prove that all suffering is punishment and all blessing a reward for righteousness. And as the speeches develop Job grows increasingly frustrated with his friends and increasingly defiant and pessimistic. The irony of the speeches is that Job's friends are wrong but they argue their case well. Job, on the other hand, is right (he is not being punished) but he argues it poorly becoming indignant with everyone, including God.

A fourth friend, Elihu, is introduced in chapter 32, and he suggests a category that no one has considered: that the suffering of the righteous could have a good purpose. He suggests that "that the suffering of the righteous is not a token of God's enmity but of his love. It is not a

punishment of their sins but a refinement of their righteousness. It is not a preparation for destruction, but a protection from destruction."²

5 "Behold, God is mighty, and does not despise any; he is mighty in strength of understanding" (Job 36:5).

"15 He delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity" (Job 36:15).

"22 Behold, God is exalted in his power; who is a teacher like him?" 23 Who has prescribed for him his way, or who can say, 'You have done wrong?'" (Job 36:22-24).

Job's suffering is not, as the three friends suggested, a proof of Job's wickedness, nor is suffering, as Job suggested, due to some randomness in God.

The Who Question (38:1-42:6)

In chapters 38-42 God speaks directly to Job: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me" (38:2-3). What follows in the next five chapters is a blistering but gracious interrogation of Job as God through asking questions demonstrates His infinite power and wisdom. Question after question is asked in order to remind Job of the things that he cannot do, and that only God can do.³

"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" (38:4)

"Have you entered into the springs of the sea?" (38:16)

"Are you a father to rain?" (38:28)

"Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?" (39:1)

"Do you give the horse his might?" (39:19)

Job is left speechless and humbled. "I heard of you by the hearing of the ear but now my eye sees you; therefore I repent in dust and ashes" (42:5-6). He learns the beauty of the who question. Namely that God is worthy of faith and trust even though his ways are often mysterious.

The Restoration of Job (42:7-17)

The book concludes through a narrative account in which God brings a measure of resolution. God rebukes Job's three friends (note that Elihu is not rebuked), telling them that Job must

² John Piper. *Job: Rebuked in Suffering*. July 21, 1985. -

http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/18/499_Job_Rebuked_in_Suffering/

³ D.A. Carson. *How Long O Lord? – Reflections on Suffering and Evil*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1990, 171.

offer sacrifices on their behalf. He vindicates Job by saying that he has spoken what is right. Finally, God restores the fortune that Job had lost, "blessing the latter days of Job more than the beginning" (42:12).

Through this book we see that the righteous do indeed suffer. Job breaks through the frail categories of punishment for sin / blessing for righteousness. It introduces us to difficult subjects, tough questions, and issues in tension. And in the end, the book leaves us with lofty view of the sovereignty God left in tension. The righteous do suffer, and we don't always know specifically why.

"Job teaches us that, at least in this world, there will always remain some mysteries to suffering. He also teaches us to exercise faith – not blind, thoughtless submission to an impersonal status quo, but faith in the God who has graciously revealed himself to us."⁴

The book calls us to embrace the fact that when we suffer there will often be mystery. The question is, "Are we content with the answer to the Who question?"

How Job Helps Us

Admittedly, today is a very generalist type of message. I think it is really important to establish where we are going so that when we get into some tough questions you will know the resolution to the tension that you feel. We must see the whole to deal with the parts. How does Job, as a book, help us? Let me give you four ways:

1. It shows us that suffering, while mysterious, is never pointless

Job helps us to understand that confusing events are not random events. Suffering has a point, but it is not always clear to us. This is probably the most important lesson that we must learn lest we become angry, bitter, or apostate people.

The Bible could not be any clearer on this matter: "28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb 12:11).

2. It reminds us that sorrow and tough questions are not signs of a weak faith.

Do not confuse joy with giddiness, sorrow with despair, and honest questions with blaspheme. Suffering is not easy and trite solutions that mask deep pain or hard questions are not helpful.

⁴ Carson, p. 174.

The discipline of the Lord is painful and not pleasant (Heb 12:11), and the Bible is filled with people who poured out their hearts in grief while clinging to Christ.

"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Ps 13:1). "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46)

Endurance through suffering is a fight.

3. It calls us to live on "who?" and not "why?"

Knowing that suffering has a point and purpose is one thing; this is different. Living on "who?" not "why?" is essentially what God called Job to do. The reader knows why Job is suffering, yet God never tells him. God only points Job to himself, and the clear call is to trust.

In order to suffer well, you must let go of the "why?" question. It is a stunning to me how hard this is. We want an explanation. We want a justification. We want a reason. And the best thing that we can do is trust in the mercy and grace of God. The book calls us let go of our need to know why and cling to the Christ.

4. It pleads with us to choose to bless

It think that the two most important verse in Job are 1:21 - "the Lord gave and Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord" and 42:5 - "I heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you." Job understood the value of blessing even the hard providence of his life even though he didn't understand all the reasons why.

And that is what I invite you to do today - to choose to bless the suffering. To count it as joy! To say "blessed be the name!" For Sarah and me it was "We choose to bless stillbirth for what it taught us about God." What is it for you?

I invite you to release your need of an explanation, a reason, or a justification. I invite you not to forgive God - that is blasphemy - but to trust him. He knows what He is doing. He is good, kind, and gracious.

Suffering is personal; it is perplexing; it is paradoxical. But make no mistake about it - suffering is always, always, always filled with God-centered purpose. And therefore we can choose to bless!

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