

On Not Understanding Suffering

Text: Psalm 119:71-77 (TNIV)

71 It was good for me to be afflicted
so that I might learn your decrees.

72 The law from your mouth is more precious to me
than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.

73 Your hands made me and formed me;
give me understanding to learn your commands.

74 May those who fear you rejoice when they see me,
for I have put my hope in your word.

75 I know, LORD, that your laws are righteous,
and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me.

76 May your unfailing love be my comfort,
according to your promise to your servant.

77 Let your compassion come to me that I may live,
for your law is my delight.

Job 1 (TNIV)

1 In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. 2 He had seven sons and three daughters, 3 and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East.

4 His sons used to hold feasts in their homes on their birthdays, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. 5 When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would make arrangements for them to be purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." This was Job's regular custom.

6 One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them. 7 The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?"

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Satan answered the LORD, "From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it."

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."

9 "Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied. 10 "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. 11 But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face."

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."

Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.

13 One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, 14 a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, 15 and the Sabeans 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!"

16 While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The fire of God fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

17 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!"

18 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, 19 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!"

20 At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship 21 and said:

"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."

22 In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

Job 19:25-27 (TNIV)

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“I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!”

Prayer:

Our Father in heaven, may my words lift up the fallen and give strength to the fainting heart. In Christ’s name. Amen.

Introduction:

Suffering is a fact of life. No one gets out of life alive. Babies are generally made to last 70 or 80 years but our bodies eventually wear out. They are not made to last forever. Violence, accidents, and disease can take us out early. In some countries, war and famine can do it. The older you get, the more cautious you become. We have to remember to take our pills at the right times; we have to read the labels on the canned goods. The older you get, the more life becomes like a walk in a minefield. We have to inch our way along through life, gingerly, to avoid striking something or doing something that will cause devastating results. Try as hard as we might, there is no way we can avoid suffering. We all know it. Suffering is part of life. We will not be able to avoid it. And, we won’t get out of life alive.

We can’t avoid suffering. But we don’t have to like it! We don’t have to welcome it! We don’t have to embrace it! We can praise God in spite of it. We can be thankful in the midst of it. But, we don’t have to accept it. We must never learn to enjoy it, and we will never be able to understand it!

Now, of course, if we play in the street, we might get run over. We understand that! If we touch a hot stove, we will get burned. We understand that! If we drink and drive, we risk our own life and the lives of others. We understand all that!

However, much of the suffering in life does not result from us doing anything morally or legally wrong. What we find it impossible to understand, is the kind of suffering that is prolonged, painful physically and devastating emotionally—the suffering that needs constant medical maintenance—the suffering that leaves us dependent upon others. When each day is filled with the constant presence of pain and the loss of independence, then suffering is not only intolerable, it is also incomprehensible. The reason why is that it then becomes a faith issue. A pimple on your face is not likely to cause a faith crisis. The common cold does not raise serious God-questions.

Job found himself in a faith crisis. The book is an Old Testament novel. In fact, many scholars say that the book of Job is the oldest story in the Bible. Some say he lived at the same time as Abraham, long before Israel was formed as a people of God. The story of Job was already being told when the rabbis started collecting together the sacred writings of the Jewish faith. The book of Job is the account of a person who

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experienced suffering on such a scale that we have attached his name to common phrases such as “the sufferings of Job,” “Job’s comforters,” and “the patience of Job.”

Job is a honourable man. He is a blameless and upright individual. Even God says that about him! He is morally upright, and he worships God regularly. He has 10 children and there are thousands of animals on his ranch. He has many servants, lots of land—prime real estate. He is as rich as Bill Gates and Warren Buffett. He is living on Easy Street. His family is healthy and prosperous. Job is famous enough to be in listed in the world’s “Who’s Who.” He’s the kind of guy that gets invited to Royal Weddings! He is the greatest of all the men on the earth! Life is very, very good for Job.

But, one day, God is down at Starbuck’s having a coffee with his sons. (I’m taking a bit of liberty with the text here—not to lead you into heresy—but to bring out a point). Here they are, the sons of God, and The Satan is among them. The word “The Satan” is the Hebrew word “hasatan” and means the accuser and because this word is used later to speak of the rebellious angel who was in the Garden of Eden, many people think this Satan is the same one. It may not be. Here in the book of Job, this may be a title not an name. There is no real evidence that it is the NT Satan—just that the name is the same. But, here they are. The Satan is with them sitting around with God and God asks the accuser: “Where have you been?”

The Satan replies, “Out and about!”

God says: “Did you ever run into my servant Job? He’s a great guy! Blameless, upright! Goes to church, stays out of trouble!”

The Satan, sipping on a Latte, shakes his head and says, “Seems to me he’s in it for what he can get out of it. Sure, you are blessing the man’s socks off! Look at the guy’s bank account. Of course, he’s worshipping you. You’ve given him the life of Riley. He’s won the Lotto. Just remove the blessings and he will backslide in a New York minute.”

“Okay,” says God, “do what you like but don’t touch his life.”

In no time at all, Job is reduced to nothing. He rips his clothes as a sign of suffering and he shaves his head as a sign of grief. He resigns himself to his situation and makes this claim: “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.” He doesn’t blame The Satan. He doesn’t blame God, as such. But, he sees God as active in the process of his suffering. And, he can still praise God.

But, then, the suffering hits not just his relatives and his ranch and his riches; it strikes his body. Pus, scabs, and sores cover his entire skin. (Sorry about that so close to lunch!) He is in absolute misery. But he says nothing.

Three friends show up. They are there to comfort him. They sit with him for a week saying nothing—just weeping with him. That is the best thing to do. Words are

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cheap and usually bring no help at all. Nothing is as useless as the pious words we tend to say to suffering people. Those who do not really understand our pain can't comfort us. At least they didn't read him a poem from a Hallmark card!

Job's friends just sat there crying along with him. It was the right thing to do. They sit near him and Job begins to spout off. He curses the day he was born. He wishes that death had given him release years ago. He wants to die. He wants to lie down and never wake up. We may think this is the depth of depression. We may think that Job is really losing it here and having a nervous breakdown. But, it might be even deeper than that. But, to wish for death is a sign of a growing bitterness against the Lord.

As soon as his friends hear his suicidal talk, they weigh in. "You shouldn't talk like that," they say. "Bitterness is blasphemy and God is likely to punish you more for talking like that."

But Job is at the end of his rope. He can't imagine the pain getting any worse. His friends probably thought their rebuke would shock him out of his bitterness. It didn't work. They should have just let him get it off his chest. It would have been better if they had just ignored him. After all, Jonah, Jeremiah, and Elijah, all great men of God, had said much the same. Job is in good company. Many Bible characters complained to God.

The Psalmist had the same experience. "Why do you hide your face from me, when I need you most?" It's there in Psalm 10: "Why, Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?"

If you have ever visited a sick person, you will hear this often. It is an honest statement. There is a transparency about it. There is no religious veneer to hide the truth. In times of great pain, people can have a faith crisis. They can say pretty strong stuff.

It's not much good for us to say, "Don't say stuff like that! Don't make matters worse! We just have to stay positive and believe that God is good!" We parrot the cliché, "God is good, all the time! All the time, God is good!"

It doesn't help to say that to people in the midst of severe pain. Those who are in pain deserve the freedom to say what they want to say. They are in great company. Jonah did it; Habakkuk did it, and so did Jeremiah and Elijah.

As long as Job's comforters kept their mouths shut, they comforted him. As soon as they started to speak, they only made matters worse. One friend tried to wade into theological waters that were way over his head. He was an amateur theologian. "Job," he said "In this life you get what you deserve. You have done something to tick God off and he is punishing you. There's sin in your life."

This was an awful thing to say and a very shallow understanding of God. All it does is to complicate matters and increase someone's suffering. On top of the suffering you pile on a layer of blame and guilt. What kind of a God is it that would torture

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people? In the gospels we get the story of a tower that fell over and killed 18 people. Jesus said that they had not sinned any more than anyone else. In another incident, the disciples found a man born blind. People were saying either he had sinned, or his parents had sinned. Jesus said it was neither the blind man nor his parents who were responsible for his blindness. There are such things as accidents and there are, in this fallen world, such things as hereditary defects. On top of the suffering, amateur theologians wish to layer blame and guilt on the victim. Very sad! We should guard our lips from claiming anything to be a God-ordained, vindictive punishment.

Job is having a faith crisis. The last thing he needs is comforters who add insult to injury by silly, shallow answers to complex problems. Job is feeling abandoned and God-forsaken. He is “knock, knock, knocking on heaven’s door,” but no one is answering.

Have you not, at some time or another, been there? Have you ever had pain so severe and so long that you thought you would never come out of it alive? Pat answers and pats on the back don’t cut it. Sometimes, suffering simply cannot be understood or explained. The only comfort we have is that we know other people too have suffered and survived. And, even the Lord Jesus himself cried out in desperation, “My God, why have you forsaken me?”

And from the pain of Gethsemane through the suffering of the cross, Jesus triumphed even over death! Job lived many centuries before Christ but in this great Old Testament novel we get a brief glimpse of a light that breaks through. I just love this part of Job. I suspect the reason why this book has survived is because of the powerful hope contained in these verses. Job is able to say:

“I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!” Job 19:25-27 (TNIV)

One day, we will get an audience with the Lord of history. One day we will get to ask the Lord himself, the reason for all this we have to endure in this life. Our Lord has suffered, too. He has suffered, to tell the suffering, that through his suffering, he will bring an end to suffering. He will bring redemption.

In Hebrews 2:6-9 (ESV) the author writes:

6It has been testified somewhere,

“What is man, that you are mindful of him,

or the son of man, that you care for him?

7You made him for a little while lower than the angels;

you have crowned him with glory and honor,

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8putting everything in subjection under his feet.”

Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. 9But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.”

What is true of Jesus will, one day, be true of us. He suffered too. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again!

One day, not today, we will know the answer to the why question. Right now, the best help we have of dealing with suffering is to know that Jesus passed through it also and is able to help us. And, because he had been through it, the author of Hebrews calls Jesus the “author and the finisher of our faith.” He has blazed the trail before us. He has made a way. He has conquered death. Imagine, Jesus, the friend that sticks closer than a brother, has taken down the bully. Jesus has defeated death! That knowledge is the real and true Job’s comforter.

The reformation document known as the Heidelberg Catechism asks: “What is thy only comfort in life and death?” The answer reads: “That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, hath fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.”

The suffering can never be satisfied by the amateur theology of Job’s comforters. Pat answers do not work in the context of real pain. But, one day, the redeemed will see God. We shall see the redeemer. We will know who he is. We shall see him and not another. I believe this truth. Do you? My father used to pray, “Keep us faithful until that day dawns and the shadows flee away.”

Until that day dawns, let us be faithful to Christ. We have to endure our going yonder. Not everything is subjected to us here, yet. Therefore, we keep looking at Jesus. His resurrection guarantees that one day things will be clearer to us.

One of my professors, Victor Shepherd, told the story of William Sangster, a great Methodist preacher. He died horribly of a rare disease. When he was a young boy, a sister was born into the family. She was born deformed and died when she was just nine years old. She had had 14 surgeries that left five gaping wounds in her head. The family kept her hidden from view. We can never explain that today. Don’t even go there. There is no way to explain that.

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Years later, Sangster was at a church camp and he ran out of money for the canteen. He sent a postcard to his father asking for help. Would he send more money? No answer came. His buddies began to tease him. "Maybe your father has forgotten you are here." "Perhaps he's just too busy to bother with you." "Maybe your father doesn't even care about you." Sangster, even as a young boy, refused to entertain such idea. His friends continued, "Then what is the explanation?"

"I don't know," he replied, "I simply don't know. I will have to wait until I get home, and my father will tell me, himself."

Job said, "I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" Job 19:25-27 (TNIV)

Suffering is a mystery not solvable this side of eternity. Not everything is subjected to us here. But one day we will see God! We shall ask our father when we get home.

Until that day dawns and the shadows flee away let us continue to serve and praise our redeemer even in our suffering, and even when we don't understand it. It's okay not to understand suffering.

"I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" Job 19:25-27 (TNIV)

Prayer:

Grant to us, our Father, courage in the face of suffering, and hope for eternal life. In Jesus name, we ask. Amen.

Benediction:

Hebrews 13:20-21 (Today's New International Version)

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.