

## God and Suffering

Job 19:4-29

So, if God really loves us, and if He really is almighty, then why do such terrible things keep happening? Why did that tornado flatten so much of Selma, when so many of the people there were so poor to begin with? Why did Hurricane Katrina devastate the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and Hurricane Harvey flood the Houston area and Hurricane Ida cause so much damage in South Louisiana?

And what about plagues like the Spanish Flu and polio and Covid-19? What about wars like the one that is devastating Ukraine? What about incurable diseases like cancer and diabetes and strokes? Why doesn't God do something about all this suffering?

It's a good question, and one that becomes even more urgent when it hits closest to home. Yes, it's when our prayers for our loved ones go unanswered, or when we find ourselves in the grip of grief – that's when we just can't understand why, if our all-powerful God really cares as much as He says He does, He would make us go through such pain.

As a result, many people have gone so far as to reject faith in God altogether. Others try to relieve the tension by denying that God is able to prevent many of life's disasters. Oh, they still claim to believe that God exists. They try to take comfort that God is with us in our sufferings, and that He really cares. And yet they insist that that all He can actually do is to hold our hands and sympathize with us.

Well, such a belief might seem to relieve God from the blame for so much of the pain that surrounds us. But let's face it: it doesn't exactly square with the Biblical record, does it? Even in Job's time – and he seems to have lived in the days before Moses was born – God had already displayed His power in all sorts of miraculous ways. In the days of Noah, God had sent a great flood to wash the earth clean of its violence. In the days of Abraham, God had rained down fire out of heaven to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness. In the days of Joseph, God had sent seven years of plenty and then seven years of famine on the Middle East. And make no mistake: Joseph clearly told Pharaoh that God Himself was responsible for what happened during all fourteen of those years (Genesis 41:32).

Oh, and that doesn't even mention the tremendous power God displayed in creation, a power that both Job and his friends mention throughout this book. They all knew that God "stretches out the heavens and tramples down the waves of the sea" (9:8), creating everything out of nothing, speaking the world into existence through the languages of gravity and physics, of photosynthesis and DNA. No, there's no way even a casual student of the Bible can doubt God's power, God's ability to do whatever He wishes.

And so in order to solve this puzzle – in order to understand how an all-powerful, all-loving God could nevertheless allow terrible suffering to afflict His creation – Job's friends took a different tack. Instead of denying God's power, they clung to a belief that all human suffering is an expression of God's justice.

Now, Job's friends weren't thinking about the many problems that man's sinful nature has unquestionably inflicted on the world in general, from wars and riots to pollution and mass extinctions. No, because they knew that God is just and righteous, rewarding the good and punishing the wicked, Job's friends were convinced that Job must have been suffering because he himself had committed some great sin. Zophar, for example, insisted that all Job needed to do was to direct his heart and spread out his hands to God. Then his troubles would be gone. If only Job would put away his sin, he would rest securely, and no one would disturb him anymore (11:13-19).

And Eliphaz went so far as to accuse Job of specific sins: taking advantage of debtors, refusing to give water and bread to the poor, and even sending widows away hungry. That's why Eliphaz said Job was experiencing so much darkness and dread (22:5-11).

So, why would Job's friends say such terrible things about someone they claimed to know so well and care about so much? Not only because they wanted to make sense out of Job's suffering, to answer the question of why an all-powerful, loving God would nevertheless allow Job to lose everything he had. No, Job's friends also wanted to cling to an illusion of control. For after all, if the only reason people experience great suffering is because they have committed a great sin, then anyone can avoid great suffering by avoiding great sin. Saying that Job was somehow to blame for the great calamities that befell him thus allowed his friends to stay firmly in the driver's seat of their lives.

But they should have known Job better than that. After all, in the first two chapters of this book, the Lord Himself says that Job was "blameless and upright, fearing God and turning away from evil" (1:8 and 2:3). And from reading those first two chapters, we know that Job was right: he did not in fact do anything to bring all his suffering upon himself. And Job knew that too: that's why he kept crying out to God to tell him why he was going through such grief and pain.

Yes, Job refused to take the easy way out. He refused to deny either the existence of God or the power of God. Instead, even in the midst of his anguish, he clung to a belief in the sovereignty of God, the reality that God is completely in charge of everything that happens. For notice that in today's passage, Job specifically says that God is the One Who removed his honor from him. God is the One Who made his path dark with confusion. God is the One Who caused his relatives, his acquaintances, and even his servants to turn away from him. In fact, Job went so far as to say that God had considered him to be an enemy (19:11).

And yet at the same time, Job clung to his faith in God. In fact, back in chapter 13, he insisted, "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him" (13:15). Instead of denying either God's power or His love, Job kept praying to God, kept pleading that God would help him understand all the terrible things that were happening to him. In short, Job knew good and well that God was in charge of all the awful circumstances of his life, but he still looked to God for justice and mercy. He kept begging God to deliver him.

How could Job have such great faith, even when everything was going wrong for him? And how can we keep trusting in God, even in the face of our own disappointments and discouragements, our own grief and despair?

Well, Job gives us a clue in today's passage: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth" (19:25). No, Job may not have understood why he was going through such terrible circumstances. But he was sure that God would one day show up, setting all things right and making all things new. It was such hope that kept Job looking to God, even if that meant continuing to grapple with God in anguished prayer.

And how much greater reason do we have to hold on to such faith! After all, we know that God has already sent His promised Messiah – Jesus. And we know that Jesus did in fact heal the sick and raise the dead and cast out the demons, displaying both the love and the power of God so clearly, so unmistakably. And we know that Jesus has promised that He will in fact return to earth on the last day, fully and finally putting an end not only to sickness and suffering, not only to oppression and injustice, but to sin and death, the cause of all our miseries.

But Jesus has also promised that, on the day He returns, He will bring the souls of all His people who have departed with Him. And He has promised that we will live with Him forever, not floating around in

the clouds as disembodied spirits, but here on the earth in transformed, resurrected bodies. As Job affirms in verse 26, it will be in our flesh that those who love and trust Jesus will see Him.

Yes, for Job and for us, it is our faith in Christ – His life, His death, His resurrection, His ascension, and His promise to come again in glory – that’s what keeps us going even in the midst of our pain and sorrow, our grief and despair. No, we may not understand why terrible things keep happening to us and our loved ones. But because His cross proves that Jesus loves us, and because His empty tomb proves that Jesus can help us, we can be sure that Jesus is coming again to wipe away every tear from our eyes. And so we can keep on trusting Him; we can keep on praying to Him; we can keep on clinging to Him no matter what happens.

But as we wait and as we hope and as we trust in Christ, Job also shows us one way that we can draw close to Jesus even as we endure the sufferings of this present evil age. For think about it: we really get to know people when we share experiences with them, don’t we? Whether it’s a fun trip to a football game or a meaningful mission trip, or crying together in a hospital room, we really connect with the folks with whom we share the most important parts of our lives.

Well, didn’t Job and Jesus have a lot in common? In verse 19, Job says that because of his misfortunes, all his associates, all those he loved had turned away from him. And didn’t Isaiah say the same thing about Jesus in our responsive reading? Wasn’t Jesus despised and rejected, not just by the self-righteous religious leaders of the day, but also by His own disciples?

Yes, all throughout this book, Job continues to plead his innocence: in chapter 16, he says, “There is no violence in my hands and my prayer is pure” (16:17). And yet he says in the same chapter, “God hands me over to ruffians and tosses me into the hands of the wicked. I was at ease, but He shattered me” (16:11-12). And didn’t Isaiah tell us that Jesus was stricken, smitten by God and afflicted? In spite of Jesus’ innocence, in spite of the fact that he was the perfect, spotless Lamb of God, wasn’t it the will of the Lord to bruise Jesus and put Him to grief?

Yes, we know that, much like Job, Jesus cried out in anguished prayer to the Father to remove the cup of suffering from Him. And yet we know that Jesus chose to go through all the pain and shame of the cross in order to save us. And so, one of the ways that we draw close to the One Who suffered for us is to do what Job did, to share in the same kind of suffering that Jesus went through.

Yes, it is as we experience injustice and oppression for His name, as we are despised and misunderstood because we walk in His ways, as we suffer for what seems like no good reason at all – that’s how we most clearly display the Christ within us. And it is precisely in such times that our faith often grows stronger, and that we feel closest to Him.

That was certainly true for Horatio and Anna Spafford. Like Job, they had been blessed early in life with lots of children and great wealth. But they lost their son Horatio Jr. to scarlet fever when he was 4 years old. A few years later, much of their property was lost in the great Chicago fire of 1871. And in 1873, when Anna and their four daughters were taking a trip to England to hear D.L. Moody preach, the ship on which they were sailing sank. Only Anna survived.

Horatio and Anna could have become bitter. They could have denied God’s existence or power. They could have blamed themselves for their sufferings the way Job’s friends said that he should. They could even have cursed God as Job’s wife told him to do (2:9).

But instead, in 1881, Horatio and Anna left for Jerusalem, where they devoted the rest of their lives to caring for the sick and the poor and the homeless. For they, like Job, placed their faith in their living Redeemer, the one who not only has shared in all our suffering but has shed His own blood that our sins might be wiped away. Yes, because Horatio, Anna, and Job got a taste of what Jesus went through for

all of us, they looked forward all the more eagerly to the day when our faith will be sight, the day when we will see Christ face to face.

That's how Job could keep on trusting in God and wrestling with God, even when nothing in his life made sense. That's how Anna could say just after that terrible shipwreck, "God gave me four daughters. Now they have been taken from me. Someday I will understand why." That's how Horatio could write the hymn with which we will close our worship today. And that's how we will be able to face whatever trials will come our way: with confidence in God's sovereign power even over death, with hope in God's unconditional love, with certainty in Christ's triumphant return, and with growing fellowship with Jesus through the very sufferings that we endure. That's how we will be able to say, no matter our lot, that it really is well with our souls.