

HOW COULD A GOOD GOD ALLOW SUFFERING?

Job 42:1-6

(OT: Ps 13:1-6; NT: Jn 3:22-36)

PRELIMINARY MATTERS

- One of my mentors in the faith is a presbyterian pastor called Tim Keller.
- He wrote a book called *TRFG*:
 - Shaped my own understanding of suffering.
 - Not just intellectually but personally.
- Much of what I'll share today comes from this book.
 - Want you to know that.
 - And, if you're new to our church, I'd love to give you a copy.
 - Copies available in Welcome Center after the service – free for you.
 - If we run out, we'll take your name and get you a copy for next week.

Transition: But now, let's give our attention to God's Word → A book that can be trusted...

- Turn with me to **Job 42:1-6**.
- Book of Job opens by introducing us to Job himself.
 - A righteous man who walks faithfully before the Lord.
 - Blessed with great health, great wealth, and a great family.
- But as the story unfolds – for reasons that are unknown to Job but known to God and to the reader – all of this is stripped from him → He loses his health, he loses his wealth, he even loses his very family – all of his children die.
- Job remonstrates with God as to why disaster/disaster/disaster have befallen him.
- And then, in **chp 38**, the Lord appears to Job and answers him with a series of questions.
- Following this *encounter*, Job issues a reply of his own in the verses we're about to read.
- So, let's read them together as launch into our reflections on suffering. **[Read Job 42:1-6]**

INTRODUCTION

- It's weighty, isn't it, to reflect upon the depth of suffering that's in our world.
- I'm not talking about the "First World Problems" → You know what I mean by that.
 - This week I did a brutal workout at CrossFit...
 - Row, jump rope, and run miles → by the end of it I felt like a dead man.
 - But then I woke up next morning/thought, "No – NOW I feel like a dead man."
 - Or I remember a friend telling me a story that highlights our tendency to complain.
 - Came after heard Holocaust survivor give moving account of his time in death camp.
 - After the talk, my friend was able to have dinner with the survivor → As they made way through buffet line, the survivor complained about food that was on display.
 - NOT judging this man → Rather he holds up a mirror for us:
 - Are we not a people who have, by God, been brought through the Holocaust only to complain about the buffet?
 - We all like to fuss about "First World Problems."
- But that's not what I've been thinking about this week → I've been thinking about the depth of suffering in our world that is horrendous, that is horrific:

- GLOBALLY: Ukraine
- NATION: Nashville
- LIVES: I've suffered trauma of sexual abuse → Many of you suffered more than I have.
- Add to that inexplicable suffering:
 - GLOBALLY: Earthquake in Turkey
 - NATION: Tornadoes in Mississippi
 - LIVES: Cancer, tragedy, death

Transition: Found myself asking: God, why do you allow this?

- Suffering is a challenge to any believer...
- We can understand why the existence of suffering has led some to reject God:
 - 18C Scottish PHILOSOPHER **David Hume** popularized this line of thinking: *“Is [God] willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent.”*¹
 - One SKEPTIC put it this way: *“God... might be either all-powerful but not good enough to end evil and suffering, or else he might be all-good but not powerful enough to end evil and suffering. Either way the all-good, all-powerful God of the Bible couldn't exist.”*²
- How could a good God allow suffering?
 - Like to share **3 considerations** in response to this question.
 - Invite you to reflect on them with me...

1. SUFFERING ISN'T EVIDENCE AGAINST GOD.³

State: In face of suffering there's an emotional appeal to abandon belief in God BUT doing so might not make sense when we think about it...

- At first, the logic of Hume and the skeptic quoted a moment ago makes sense: *“If a good and powerful God exists, he would not allow pointless evil, but because there is much unjustifiable, pointless evil in the world, the traditional good and powerful God could not exist.”*⁴
- But do you see that lurking within this objection is a subtle form of pride?
 - If suffering appears pointless to *me*, then it must in fact *be* pointless...
 - If I – with my great intellect – can't make sense of it, it can't make sense...
- But just bc we can't see a good reason why God might allow suffering doesn't mean that there isn't one.

Illustrate: Error in this way of thinking is illustrated by philosopher **Alvin Plantinga**.⁵

- Imagine you go camping and you take your dog with you → Your delightful but hulking, 180lb St. Bernard...
 - At one point you lose her...
 - You look in your tent, but you don't see her...
 - It's more than reasonable to conclude she's not in there!
 - But imagine instead you're looking for a mosquito...
 - You look in your tent and you don't see one...
 - But you shouldn't be so quick to conclude that there isn't one in there!
- In same way, we tend to assume that if there were good reasons for suffering, they would be obvious to us – like St. Bernards, not mosquitos – but why should that be the case?

Apply: This point is made very powerfully in our passage.

- Flick with me to the start of **Job 38**.
 - After Job has remonstrated with the Lord, the Lord appears to him to humble him lest he fall into this kind of intellectual pride.
 - Listen to the questions the Lord asks Job at the start of chapter 38 [**Read VV1-18**].
 - God continues this series of rhetorical questions all the way through to end of **chp 38**.
 - Then he picks up at start of **chp 39** and continues all the way through to **chp 40**.
 - Then he picks up again in **chp 40** and continues all the way through to **chp 41**.
 - Then he picks up again in **chp 41** and continues all the way through to **chp 42**.
 - Chapter after chapter after chapter after chapter to help us see:

God's ways are not our ways.

 - Just bc we don't understand something, doesn't mean it's not understandable.
 - Just bc we can't see reason for suffering, doesn't mean there isn't one.
- Tim Keller comments:⁶
 - *"If you have a God great and transcendent enough to be mad at because he hasn't stopped evil and suffering in the world, then you have (at the same moment) a God great and transcendent enough to have good reasons for allowing it to continue that you can't know."*
 - If we can see reasons for at least some of the pain/suffering in life: *"Why couldn't it be possible that, from God's vantage point, there are good reasons for all of them?"*

Summary:

- What do you make of that?
- Perhaps we shouldn't assume that suffering is evidence *against* God.

Transition:

- In his book, Keller takes this argument a little farther and gives us a second consideration.⁷
- Suffering shouldn't be seen as evidence *against* God → And...

2. SUFFERING MAY BE (IF ANYTHING) EVIDENCE *FOR* GOD.

State:

- Inexplicable suffering is certainly a challenge for those of us who believe in God.
- But you could argue it's an even greater challenge for those who say there is no God.

Illustrate: Keller uses example of **C. S. Lewis** who originally rejected God bc of cruelty of life.

- But Lewis came to realize that evil was *more* problematic for him as an atheist.
- In his book *Mere Christianity* he wrote this:
 - *"My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got his idea of "just" and "unjust"?... What was I comparing the universe with when I called it unjust?"*⁸
 - Lewis recognized that his objection to God was based on a sense of justice:
 - People *ought* not to suffer.
 - But without God, he realized he had no basis for this conclusion.

Apply: You see what Lewis is pushing us to consider?

- If you are outraged and sorrowful about the existence of suffering – and you should be...
- WHY are you outraged and WHY are you sorrowful?
 - Where did you get this sense of justice from?
 - On what basis do you determine that it *ought* not be this way?
- If you're sure that world contains unjust suffering:
 - You're assuming the reality of some standard by which to make your judgment...
 - And where do you get that objective standard from if there is no God?
- To reject God bc suffering exists is like going to a **restaurant**, being displeased with your meal, and then concluding that the chef doesn't exist. NO! The very objection presupposes that she does.
- The problem of suffering is a problem for everyone.
 - It is therefore a mistake, though an understandable one, to think that if you abandon belief in God, it somehow makes the problem of suffering easier to handle.
 - One more quote from **Alvin Plantinga**:

“Could there really be any such thing as horrifying wickedness [if there were no God and we just evolved]? I don't see how. There can be such a thing only if there is a way that rational creatures are supposed to live... A [secular] way of looking at the world has no place for genuine moral obligation of any sort... and thus no way to say there is such a thing as genuine and appalling wickedness. Accordingly, if you think there really is such a thing as horrifying wickedness, then you have a powerful... argument [for the reality of God].”⁹

Transition: What do you make of that?

- FIRST consideration: The existence of suffering shouldn't be seen as evidence *against* God.
- SECOND consideration: The existence of suffering may be (if anything) evidence *for* God.
- But I think the THIRD consideration is by far the most important:
 - We could say: “Okay, so suffering doesn't logically disprove God – he exists.”
 - “But that doesn't make him the kind of God I want to follow – suffering still exists too.”
- That's why our third consideration is so important → And it's this:

3. SUFFERING IS OF GREATEST CONCERN TO GOD.

- If you are outraged by suffering (and should be), and if you are sorrowful about suffering (and should be) → know this:
 - ***God is more outraged and sorrowful than you or I have ever been.***
 - We don't just come to a God who exists in midst of suffering → We come to a God who is moved by it and – more than that – is doing something about it.
 - **We see this when we chart the story of the gospel:**
 - Let's begin in **CREATION**:
 - How much suffering was in world when God created it? Answer: There was none!
 - God created us to flourish in Eden → Nothing but pleasure came from his hand.
 - It was a world free from suffering, free from evil, free from pain.
 - This was his good design for us.
 - **But what happened next?**
 - Suffering is introduced to the world in the **FALL**:
 - By God's hand? No by our hands! Suffering is introduced to the world through sin.

- We read God’s response to it in **V13 of Gen 3**.
 - God comes to our first parents and asks...
 - **What is this that you have done?**
- Do you hear heartbreak in this question?
 - Adam/Eve of course did not know – could never have known – extent of suffering that would enter the world through their sin → They did not know it would lead to Abuse/Nashville/Ukraine...
 - But God – who knows the end from the beginning – knew the horrors their sin would introduce to his perfect creation.
 - And so, he comes to them and says: **What is this that you have done?**
 - He’s heartbroken that his creation will now be subject to such pain.

So, what does God do next? Wash his hands of us? No.
- After creation/fall, he orchestrates a great plan of **REDEMPTION**.
 - He is so moved by our suffering that he sends his Son.
 - To do what? To suffer.
 - And suffer like no human being has ever suffered.
 - We understand that on the cross, X does not just endure physical suffering.
 - He also suffers the full weight of God’s wrath against all evil/pain.
 - He takes it upon himself...
 - So that we can be forgiven and brought back into relationship with him.
 - We have a Suffering Savior → Who is our redemption.
 - **Edward Shillito** – poet who wrote about the horrors of the First WW put it this way:

*The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God’s wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.*¹⁰

 - Jesus of the scars...
 - A God who comes to earth in weakness – in a form that we could kill...
 - So that through his scars – by his wounds – we might be healed.

And what happens next? The hope of heaven...
 - After creation/fall/redemption comes the promise of **RESTORATION**.
 - God *has* done something about suffering → And he *will* do something about suffering.
 - He promises us that “There will be a day...”
 - There will be day when every tear is wiped, and all suffering will end.

*All creation groans as we await
What our eyes have longed to see
Every pain and evil we’ve long endured
Will be crushed by Christ our King*¹¹
 - And this is not hyperbole. WHY? Bc God has said that he will do it.
 - Can’t call upon him to **defeat any evil** that he hasn’t already promise to defeat.
 - Can’t call upon him to **heal any disease** that he hasn’t already promise to heal.
 - Can’t call upon him to **wipe any tear** that he hasn’t already promise to wipe.
 - Hope of heaven assures us that not only does God care about suffering but that “There will be a day...” when all suffering will end.
 - Creation/fall/redemption/restoration show us that when it comes to suffering:

God has the greatest concern of all.

THE CLOSE

- More than the *evidence* of the first 2 points, we need an *encounter* with the God of the third.
 - Don't make sense of suffering just by getting our intellectual arms around it → Though of course we can see that Xn faith has substantive/logical/powerful answers for us...
 - Real change only happens when the *evidence* is matched by an *encounter* with this God.
- That's what made the difference for Job.
 - Look at **VV5-6 of chp 42**.
 - After the Lord asks him 4 chapters of questions, Job responds: **I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; ⁶ therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.**
 - Job has an *encounter* with God that radically reorients his approach to suffering.
 - And in the gospel, this can be your story too...
 - **[Creation]:** Believe in the God who did not create suffering.
 - **[Fall]:** Lament that it entered our world through sin.
 - **[Redemption]:** Rejoice that Jesus came to save us from it.
 - **[Restoration]:** And hold on hope to the fact that "There will be a day..."

Bring your suffering to him, dear ones...
You won't find it all magically goes away.
But you will find that he is with you in your tears.
And he'll sustain you till that day when you First World Problems and all that is
horrendous/horrific will finally disappear.

RESOURCES AND ENDNOTES

Resources

This list contains some of the resources that were used to prepare this sermon series. Check them out if you want to dig a little deeper.

- F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*
- T. Keller, *The Reason for God*.
- Logos Bible Software.
- J. McDowell, *More Than a Carpenter* and *A Ready Defense*.
- D. Plotz, *Good Book: The Bizarre, Hilarious, Disturbing, Marvelous, and Inspiring Things I Learned When I Read Every Single Word of the Bible*.
- C. Sanders, *Introduction to Research in English Literary History*.
- F. Schaeffer, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*
- E. Shillito, *Jesus of the Scars*.
- L. Strobel, *The Case for Christ*.

Endnotes

¹ Quoted in Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*, 263.

² Keller, 22.

³ Based on Keller, 23-25.

⁴ This is Keller's summary of philosopher J. L. Mackie's argument that suffering disproves the existence of the God of the Bible. See Keller, 23.

⁵ See Keller, 24.

⁶ Both these quotes come from Keller, 25.

⁷ See Keller, 25-28.

⁸ Quoted in Keller, 26.

⁹ Quoted in Keller, 27.

¹⁰ The last verse of *Jesus of the Scars* by Edward Shillito. The whole poem can be found [here](#).

¹¹ *All Glory Be Forever*. Words and Music by Jordan Kauflin.