

Making Sense of Suffering (Job)

Big Idea: You are going to suffer. You may not be able to understand it, and you should be careful about how to explain it. But you can trust God because God is good and powerful.

Today we're looking at a book in the Bible that we don't really know how to process, and yet it's a book that we desperately need.

It's the book of Job. It's a book many Christians don't know very well, but one whose story mirrors many of our own stories. Ray Ortlund once preached on this book and said:

I used to think that the book of Job is in the Bible because this story of suffering is so extreme, so rare and improbable and unusual. I thought the message of the book is, 'Look at this worst case scenario. Now, come on. Surely in your comparatively small problems, you can find your way.' I don't think that anymore. Now I think that the book of Job is in the Bible because this story is so common.

Another man teaches regularly on the book of Job. He [says](#):

Having taught and preached the book of Job in both academic and pastoral settings for more than a decade, my sense is that most Christians are mostly or entirely unfamiliar with this book. To my mind, this is tragic, because Job's story

is extremely common. I have lost count of how many times people have approached me after I have taught or preached part of the book and told me they know someone whose life reflects Job's story – or that their own does. Even more poignant is the mingled surprise and clarity that these Christians express as the book of Job helps them to understand their predicament.

We need the wisdom of the book of Job, because, at some point, you will probably find that your story will overlap with the story of this book.

Job is one of the five books of the Old Testament that we call “wisdom books.” It's been said that:

- the Psalms teach us how to worship
- Proverbs, how to behave
- Song of Solomon, how to love
- Ecclesiastes, how to live
- Job, how to suffer

It's a story about a man who lost everything and leads us to consider the reasons why he – and by extension, the rest of us – suffer. Why do bad things happen? What's the reason behind all of our suffering?

The reason we're considering the story here is that the events seem to happen in the patriarchal period, around the same time as the events of Genesis. Tradition tells us that this book was written around the time of Moses. And yet we're going to find that this book has so much to teach us today.

Here's some of what we learn.

Suffering is normal.

Verse 1 of the book says: "There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil."

We go on to read that he was rich. He had a big family, massive herds. Life was good. This man had it all: he loved God, he was wise, he was rich, and had a great family. You'd expect that this would be a fairly happy story.

But in the space of one day, his entire world collapsed. He lost everything: his wealth and his family. To make it worse, soon after, he lost his own health. It's hard to imagine how quickly things went from being all good to all bad. His sufferings were both quick and comprehensive. Things got so bad that Job's own wife told him to curse God and die (Job 2:9).

We tend to think that, if we play our cards right, we may be able to avoid suffering. Job reminds us that suffering is normal, not exceptional. Suffering is certain. And suffering can be both quick and comprehensive. Don't be surprised when suffering comes your way.

Friends, some of us are living this. If you are here today and you feel like you have been crushed, realize: you're not alone. You're not unusual. I love the honesty of the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians. He writes, "For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself" (2 Corinthians 1:8). You can be a Christian and be burdened beyond your strength. You can suffer so much that you despair of life itself. Nobody is exempt from suffering. We all can expect to suffer.

Here's another lesson that we learn from Job:

We only see part of the picture.

Job, his wife, and his friends saw the events that took place. They witnessed the catastrophic events that took place and wiped out their wealth, their family, and Job's health. They saw the events, but they couldn't make sense of them.

But there was a lot they *couldn't* see. They couldn't see, for instance, what was happening in the spiritual realm, about a conversation in heaven that affected his life that he knew nothing about.

Most of us realize that we're affected by forces bigger than us. A few weeks ago, we had a storm roll in that just missed us but caused devastation not far from us in Buffalo. The storm was so big that it covered most of North America. Once in a while, we're reminded that our lives are affected by massive forces that are so much bigger than we usually realize.

The book of Job helps us see this at a more significant level. The Bible often presents God as sitting in his royal court in heaven, making decisions about how the universe is to be run. It also depicts the reality of supernatural beings, who carry out his commands. There's a whole spiritual world out there that affects every day of our lives, but we don't often think about it.

It's even more important to realize this because not all the spiritual forces out there are positive. Job introduces us to an accuser who challenges God's policies. Here's the crux of the accuser's argument:

Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face. (Job 1:9-11)

In other words, the accuser challenges God that Job just loves God for his blessings. He loves the gifts and not the giver, the accuser says. He doesn't love God for God himself. And this sets off these events in which Job is put to the test: will he continue to love God for God himself, even when everything else is stripped away?

By the way, that is a fair question and one we all need to wrestle with. Do we love God only when things go well? Or do we love God for God himself? If our love for God is dependent on things going well, our faith will crumble when we go through hard times. This is a question all of us must face: will we continue to love God for God himself, even when everything else is stripped away? Is God – not God's gifts – your greatest treasure?

Now, Job is an unusual case. A lot of our suffering is for very different reasons. We suffer primarily because we live in a broken world that's been damaged by sin. Sin has corrupted so much of God's good creation. We live in a world of death and decay that God will one day recreate. But we need to realize that we don't see the full picture. We don't know the reasons behind our suffering. And we may never discover them. There's far more going on than we see, and God never promises us explanations.

We can know, though, that God is on his throne. We may not know the reasons why bad things happen in our lives but we can know that God is still directing everything from his throne, and that, despite appearances, if you are a follower of Christ, God is for you. There is never a moment, even in the hardest of circumstances, that God has stopped being good or powerful. We just don't see the full picture. Even when we can't understand, God has not stopped being good.

We have a children's book in our library called [*The Moon is Always Round*](#). I love the book. The book teaches a child: what shape is the moon? It sometimes looks like a crescent, a wedge, or a squashed circle. But even when the moon looks like it's not, it's

still always round. And just as the moon's shape never changes, God's goodness, even when his purposes are obscured, never changes either.

And one day when the child's mother returns home from the hospital after a still-birth, and that child doesn't have the baby sister he hoped for, the child is faced with answering the question: is God still good even though we can't always see it? Just as the moon is always round, even when it doesn't look like it, God is always good. Though we sometimes see only a sliver of God's goodness, and though he sometimes seems to be, like the moon, hidden or absent, God is still here. He is still good. No shadow can change his fullness or goodness. He is always good, even when we can't see it.

I spend large portions of the winter wondering where the sun is. We seem to go weeks this year without seeing it. I looked at the forecast this morning, and sun is nowhere to be found. But then the sun comes out one glorious day, and we're reminded that the sun was there all along, even if we couldn't see it.

So suffering is normal, and we don't see the full picture. Here's the third thing we learn.

We need to be very careful what we say to others when they're suffering.

The suffering of Job is only part of the book. The bulk of the book – 80% – is taken up with Job's friends.

They start out okay. They come a long way to be with Job (2:11). They sit with him, mourn with him, and at first, they keep quiet. They give him the gift of presence, which is what we need most when we're suffering.

But then they start speaking. Although their arguments take up 80% of the book, their argument is easy to summarize, says [Eric Ortlund](#): God is angry at Job. They believe that Job had it coming and that he, in some way, caused his suffering by doing something wrong. They have an overly simplistic view of cause and effect, and they don't see the full picture.

Eric Ortlund writes:

No matter how much stage time they are given, they cannot manage to say a single helpful thing to him ... My sense is ... that he records the friends' speeches to show us what not to say to suffering brothers and sisters. Furthermore, I suspect that one of the reasons that the poet lets the debate go on for so long is to provoke such disgust at the friends that we resolve never to speak to a modern-day Job in the same way. The author is trying to inoculate us against this way of thinking and speaking.

Beware of simplistic insights when someone is suffering! We need wisdom. Life is complex. This point could take up a whole sermon in itself, but I'll leave it there for now.

Suffering is normal. We don't see the full picture, so we need to be careful what we say. There's one more important lesson that Job teaches us:

What we need in suffering is more than answers. We need God himself.

Job suffers. Why? That's the question we want to be answered. But God never gives Job an answer.

Instead, beginning in Job 38, God shows up. He never answers Job's questions, but he shows Job his greatness. And as Job sees God's greatness, nothing else matters.

*I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.
(Job 42:5-6)*

What God does in chapters 38 to 41 is to help us focus on his power and his goodness, along with our limits. Somehow, when you see God's power and goodness, even if you don't get answers, you have enough.

And that, my friends, is what we have. We don't have answers. But we have God. We know he is good. Just one look at the cross, at the self-giving and sacrificial love of God, is enough to tell us that he's good. And one look at the empty grave tells us that he's all-powerful. He has defeated death and evil and everything that stands against him. If God is good and powerful, we have everything we need, even if we don't have answers. We can learn to trust him even in the middle of suffering.

You are going to suffer. You may not be able to understand it, and you should be careful about how to explain it. But you can trust God because God is good and powerful. And that, as millions of people have found out, is enough.

So, Lord, help us to trust you. Thank you that your Son is not immune from suffering, but that he suffered for us to save us. So help us to trust you even in the middle of our suffering. In Jesus' name. Amen.