

THE PAIN AND SUFFERING OF GOD

Job 1 and 2 • Char Brodersen

Introduction: Good morning, church! If it's your first time joining us, welcome! As many of you know, we're spending this year building out our biblical theology—seeing how the whole story of Scripture fits together and finds its fulfillment and goal in and through Jesus Christ. This morning we're continuing in what is commonly called the Wisdom Literature.

The Wisdom Literature includes Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Solomon's Song of Songs. Biblical Wisdom Literature is different than the rest of Scripture in that it engages with some of the great questions and difficulties that humans face in this life and how we live in the gray, head on. It often answers our questions with deeper heart-probing questions by considering universal truths from human lives and the world around us. It offers language and companions for our journey through both the difficulties and joys of life. Ultimately biblical Wisdom Literature is concerned with how to live well, even flourish, in a world that is broken, unjust, and feels chaotic and haphazard. Last week we looked at how biblical wisdom leads to flourishing. This morning we're going to take this conversation in a different direction, looking at how biblical wisdom deals with pain and suffering.

I. The Reality and Unavoidability of Pain and Suffering

A. As I mentioned before, the black and white picture that biblical wisdom paints is just too neat and tidy. What happens when you are doing the work of applying biblical wisdom instruction and knowledge to your life and you aren't experiencing flourishing but rather are experiencing pain, suffering, depression, loneliness, etc.? What then? What does the Bible have to say to those who suffer unjustly, undeservingly? In our personal cases of pain and suffering, biblical Wisdom Literature can come across very condemning, cold, and discouraging, with its tidy view of the righteous being blessed and the wicked suffering because it's not how life usually works. In fact I cannot think of one prominent biblical character that did not suffer. Suffering is part of the biblical story.

1. Pastor, theologian, and author, Timothy Keller, writes in his book, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*,

"No matter what precautions we take, no matter how well we have put together a good life, no matter how hard we have worked to be healthy, wealthy, and comfortable with friends and family, and successful with our career—something will inevitably ruin it."

B. So we need to talk about suffering not because it can potentially happen to you, or because it has happened to you, but also because it will happen to you and to everyone around you. There is no way to avoid or ultimately protect yourself against pain and suffering in this life. Ultimately, everyone loses everything they have ever worked for and everyone they have ever loved.

C. One of the big questions that we have as humans is whether in our own suffering or the suffering of others is, why does God allow pain and suffering? If he is all-powerful and he is good, why does he allow it to continue in the world; why doesn't he stop it? So what does the Bible have to say to our pain and suffering?

II. The Problem of Pain and Suffering

A. God is not the author of evil

1. Many times over the course of this year, we have gone back to the foundational truths of Scripture contained in Genesis 1–3. The teaching of the Bible is that the God who is all things, who created

this world, is a God of sheer goodness. And God's creation is very good. No sin, no brokenness, no cancer, or disease, no breakdown, and discord—but wholly good. Evil, sin, brokenness, and eventually death have come into God's good world through Adam and Eve's rebellion, and we are currently living with the consequences of their choice.

2. I think we often see the world backwards. When we are faced with sickness, disease, breakdown, separation, divorce, death, and the worst experiences in this world, our question is: Why, God? Why have you done this? Why did you let my mother or father die? Why did YOU ...? The answer is—he hasn't! This is not the world that God created. We are living in Adam's world and experiencing the effects of our first parent's rebellion. And if God had brought justice and judgment, ending it right then and there, none of us would ever have lived and experienced all the good we have in the world and in our lives.
 - a. **James 1:16–18: Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first-fruits of all he created.**

B. God is at war with evil, sin, and death

1. This is the hope and promise of Scripture, that our God will eradicate all evil, sin, and death from his good creation and will make all things new. (We will come back to this point.)

C. God uses suffering for his good purposes and our refinement

1. As I mentioned before, it's hard to find one prominent biblical character that didn't suffer. The story of Joseph is a single snapshot to us of how God uses evil and suffering to serve his redemptive purposes. Remember Joseph's words to his brothers who had betrayed him—**"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."** —Genesis 50:20

D. God is sovereign, wise, and good in his purposes

1. These answers may help soften the blow of pain and suffering. But are they enough?
2. To be honest, when we come to the book of Job looking for some kind of consolation to our suffering, you won't find much there.
 - a. My seminary professor admits that he personally hates the book of Job. And the reason he does is because when we consider all that we just talked about—God's goodness, not being the author of evil, God being at war with sin, evil, suffering, and death—God using suffering in our lives to save, to preserve, to refine—what we read in the book of Job should disturb us because it seems to contradict this.
 - b. How do I mean?
 - (i) Well, in the story of Job, God and the Satan (meaning the accuser) make a wager concerning Job. The Satan accuses Job of only being a righteous man because God has blessed him so abundantly and actually protects his life and Satan bets that Job will curse God to his face if his blessing and protection are removed. God agrees to the terms—Satan can attack Job and put him to the test. What the heck?! How can this be?
 - (ii) The Satan goes out against Job and takes everything from him—all his children are killed in a moment, his wealth and possessions taken in an instance, his health—struck with painful sores all over his body, his honor tarnished—he must be cursed!—and he is left with his wife and his self-righteous friends. (What happens to Job in a moment will happen to all of us over a lifetime)

- (a) His response to all of this is, **“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.”** And the author writes, **“In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.” —Job 1:21–22**
 - (b) His wife’s response is to tell him to get it over with and to curse God and die—to which he strongly objects.
 - (c) His friends, one by one, lecture him on the righteousness, goodness, and justice of God and accuse him of gross hidden sin that he must repent of to remove God’s judgment.
 - (d) Job answers his accusers and miserable comforters by protesting his innocence. For 36 chapters. Job maintains his innocence, and his protest gets louder and bolder.
 - (e) One thing that stands out about the story of job is that his friends pontificate about God—Job directs his complaint to God.
 1. One of his complaints is that God cannot be brought to trial so that he can answer us—we cannot put him in the dock, so to speak.
 2. Throughout the book, he longs for an audience with God. If he could only reach into the heavens—he needs and longs for a mediator, a witness, a redeemer—but the heavens seem like iron. There is no answer! But Job will not relent—he continues to rant and protest.
 3. **“He is not a mere mortal like me that I might answer him, that we might confront each other in court. If only there were someone to mediate between us, someone to bring us together, someone to remove God’s rod from me, so that his terror would frighten me no more. Then I would speak up without fear of him, but as it now stands with me, I cannot.” —Job 9:32–35**
 4. **“Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high. My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God; on behalf of a man he pleads with God as one pleads for a friend.” —16:19–21**
 5. **“Oh that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll, that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead, or engraved in rock forever! 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!” —19:23–27**
3. After 36 chapters of debating his friends, protesting God, and growing in his outrage and boldness, God shows up in a whirlwind! (Talk about some perspective.) God shows up but it’s not what anyone expects—it’s not with answers to Jobs questions, to his suffering, to the injustices—but God brings questions to Job. God asks Job more than 80 rhetorical questions: Who, what, and have you/can you questions. Questions like—who shut up the sea behind its doors? What is the way to the abode of light; Where does darkness reside? Have you entered the storehouses of snow? Have you ever given orders to the morning; or shown the dawn its place. Surely you know; you can tell me, can’t you??
 4. Two things are clear by the end of God’s questions—**God is holy and completely other.** He is Creator and Sustainer, and we are creatures and the sustained.

- a. *“God’s powerful and often mysterious rule of the universe, while utterly sovereign, is caring, with its eye on the well-being of his whole creation. God satisfies the land with rain (38:27); he feeds the lion (38:39) and the raven (39:41); he provides the wild donkey with a home and food (39:5–8). He also provides freedom and the ‘wisdom’ for horses, ostriches, oxen, locusts, eagles, and hawks to achieve their created purpose in the world. By implication, if he so cares for the animals, how much more does he care for Job?” —Craig Bartholomew, *When You Want to Yell at God**

5. The giant elephant in the room—God does not answer Job’s or our questions

- a. *“That this book should ignore our burning questions is a huge disappointment. But there is no mistaking the thrust of it. It cuts us down to size, treating us not as philosophers but as children—limited in mind, puny in body—whose first and fundamental grasp of truth must be to know the difference between our place and God’s, and to accept it. We may reflect that if, instead of this, we were offered a defense of our Creator’s ways for our approval, it would imply that he was accountable to us, not we to him. And if, not being offered this, we were to demand it, we should be guilty of the arrogance of Adam.” —Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes**

E. What is the answer then to Job?

1. Job’s boldness is gone, his protest—non-existent. Seeing God with newly opened eyes, he has no questions, only a confession and a humility that is as deep as his indignation had been high. Don’t we want this story to end differently? With God’s clear explanation of the *why*? With a final speech by Job like, “Now I see it all; though I’m glad that I spoke out, I now withdraw the charge.”
2. Job’s response is different—I had heard of you, now I see you—I take back what I said and I repent in dust and ashes.
 - a. **“I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge.’ Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.’ My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I recant and repent in dust and ashes.” —Job 42:1–6**
 - b. This is one of the most powerful encounters with God in all of the Old Testament Scriptures. And clearly for Job, it was absolutely transformational. But I have to say, this is still not the vindication that I’m looking for in my own life. I want encounter—but I also want answers. And I imagine that some are left wondering—is that it? Is the biblical answer to suffering—God is not the author of evil, God is at war with evil, God uses evil for good? and like in Job’s case, you are too small and limited to understand the infinite wisdom and ways of God.
 - c. I believe there is something more here that we could miss because *it’s not what we expect.*
 - d. Job says, **“My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you ...”**

III. The Answer to Our Pain and Suffering—the Pain and Suffering of God

- A. I’ve often wondered if C. S. Lewis was meditating on the words and experience of Job as he wrote his book, *Till We Have Faces*. The main character, Orual, brings her accusations to the gods, her outrage, her self-justification, all her suffering. But then she encounters God face to face. She says, *“I ended my first book with the words ‘no answer.’ I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face, questions die away. What other answer would suffice? Only words, words; to be led out to battle against other words.” —C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces**

1. **God himself is the answer, and in his presence, all questions die away**

- B. Do you recall Jesus' words to his disciples on the night before he was brutally beaten, mocked, and crucified? He said, **“In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me”? Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything.**” —John 16:19–23

1. Author Dorothy Sayers writes about the disciples meeting the resurrected Lord Jesus, *“Now indeed, they could go out and ‘do something’ about the problem of sin and suffering. They had seen the strong hands of God twist the crown of thorns into a crown of glory, and in hands as strong as that they knew themselves safe. They had misunderstood practically everything Christ had ever said to them, But no matter: the thing made sense at last, and the meaning was far beyond anything they had dreamed. They had expected a walkover, and they beheld a victory; they had expected an earthly messiah, and they beheld the Soul of eternity. It had been said of old time, ‘No man shall look upon my face and live’; but for them a means had been found. They had seen the face of the living God turned upon them; and it was the face of a suffering and rejoicing Man.”* —Dorothy Sayers, *The Greatest Drama Ever Staged*

- C. Before the face of the crucified, resurrected, death-conquering Messiah, Jesus, there are no more questions. He is the answer! He is the hope and longing, the fulfillment of every cry of injustice, of all suffering and evil being finally answered. Our God has come and has dealt with evil, pain, and suffering, and now he is working to make all things new!

1. Again, author Dorothy Sayers, writing about the Incarnation of God, said, *“For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is—limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death—God had the honesty and the courage to take his own medicine. Whatever game he is playing with his creation, he has kept his own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that he has not exacted from himself. He has himself gone through the whole human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair and death. When he was a man, he played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile.”* —Dorothy Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church*

2. When God came to earth, he did not immune himself to the human condition, he fully identified with it and took it upon himself. As the prophet said: **“He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”** —Isaiah 53:3–5

D. **The shame and suffering of the cross**

1. The New Testament refers again and again to the shame of the cross, referring to it as an offense—because it was the most dehumanizing, excruciating way for a human to die. Decent Roman citizens didn't even talk about the cross in public because it was so appalling and grotesque. To this day, I am not sure humans have figured out a more brutal or painful way to kill someone, and yet this is the death that God chose to die in order to redeem humanity. But it isn't just the fact that the physical sufferings of the cross are so awful—but it is also the social shame and rejection as well.

2. The sufferings of Jesus Christ were immense not only physically, but also emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. (We see something of this in the prophetic psalms—there is a spiritual/psychological battle going on at the cross.)
3. Remember what we are told by the gospel writers? **“When the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” —Mark 15:33–34**
 - a. Jesus identifies and feels what all of humanity has felt in their suffering—God forsaken, forgotten—like the heavens are made of iron.
 - b. Jesus sufferings are immeasurable—yet when he cries out, he never cries out about his pain—but he cries out about his abandonment and about his thirst. Isn’t that strange?
 - c. **“After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), ‘I thirst.’” —John 19:28**
 - d. Jesus is definitely thirsty—he’s dehydrated and drowning in his own blood. But I’m not convinced that this is why Jesus says this. We are told that he said this fulfilling the Scriptures, so automatically we should be looking for a deeper meaning here. Not only that, but once again, we haven’t heard Jesus say one word about his head, his back, his hands, his feet, his face—but all of a sudden his thirst is unbearably painful?
 - e. Think about the horror as we get the full impact of what John is saying at the thought of Jesus being thirsty. The one who announced to the Jewish nation: **“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.”** Has the living water run out? Has the water of life failed? The fullness has been emptied, the infinite has become finite, the source of life has come to death for our sake, for our sin, so we can be filled with God’s living water.
 - (i) On the cross of Jesus, God himself is crucified, but it’s not just the pain and suffering of the Son—the Father suffers the death of his Son, whom he dearly loves, and takes upon himself the pain and suffering of humanity. Wow. The God of the Bible is not far off in some remote palace, far removed from our pain and suffering, but is one who himself is a victim of pain and suffering.
 - (ii) John Stott, in his book, *The Cross of Christ*, wrote, *“I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the One Nietzsche ridiculed as ‘God on the cross’. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? ... I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in my imagination, I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us ... The cross of Christ is God’s only self-justification in such a world as ours.”* —John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*
 - (iii) Here is radical thing to think about—The Son of God chose a life of pain and suffering, knowing full well that he would bear the sins of the world on himself, and in this way, Jesus truly is our Immanuel—not only God over us; God before us, God for us; BUT GOD WITH US—God with us in our suffering. God with us in our feelings of forsakenness. God

with us in the darkness. God with us in betrayal and abandonment. There is something incredibly consoling about someone who is with you, who has walked in your shoes, knows the same trials, troubles, pain, and suffering that you know.

- (iv) At the cross, Jesus is identifying to the fullest extent with a suffering humanity. Humanity has suffered immensely throughout history: disease, disaster, injustice, cruelty, torture, murder, heartbreak, death. History is a long tale of suffering and woe. Jesus, in his love, chose to experience the full impact of what sin had done to the human race. The cross testifies to the immeasurable compassion and camaraderie of the Son of God for suffering humanity!
- (v) English poet George Herbert (1593–1633) wrote an incredible poem called *The Sacrifice*. In it, stanza after stanza (62 in total), he chronicles the various sufferings and affliction of the life of Jesus—every one with the refrain: “Was ever grief like mine?” It’s almost like Herbert is just stacking the deck—one after another, after another. Whatever your pain is—Jesus knows. Whatever you’re suffering—Jesus knows. Sin and injustice done to you? Jesus knows. Therefore, go to him, seek his face when you feel alone and overwhelmed in suffering and pain. Go to him. Jesus knows. Tell him your sorrows!
 - (a) **Do you see what Job saw? God himself is the answer to all our pain and suffering.**

Closing: The Redemption of our Pain and Suffering

Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection redirects all suffering for God’s people because Jesus didn’t just suffer with us, but Jesus suffers in order to end all sufferings.

Paul the apostle tells us that there on the cross, God was working through Jesus to reconcile all things to himself—all things. Through the work of Jesus, God has dealt the justice and judgment our sin deserves—which is death—so now when God comes to restore all things (And HE WILL), he can destroy all sin—without destroying us.

Jesus came and suffered for us in order to end our suffering. Your suffering, your pain, my suffering, my pain, is not the end of our story. In and through the work of Jesus, God promises to fill up all our emptiness, sooth all our pain, and drown all our sorrows.

Jesus came to redirect all suffering that it might have a glorious end—all the suffering of God’s people will at last be redeemed.

Jesus’ resurrection is not just consolation—it is restoration. Through the coming resurrection—when God restores all things—we get it all back—the love, the loved ones, the goods, the beauties of this life—but in new, unimaginable degrees of glory and joy and strength.

“On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people’s disgrace from the earth. The LORD has spoken.”

—Isaiah 25:6–8

Suffering is at the heart of the Christian and biblical story, and it is part of the journey for every follower of Jesus. God is transforming us by taking us on the same path of Jesus, a path of suffering that ends in glory. So even though we might feel that these trials and troubles are defining us and that our sufferings are more than we can bear, or in Paul’s words:

“We face death all day long—we are like sheep to be slaughtered.”

The resounding response is:

“NO—In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

—Romans 8:36–39

Communion

As we come to the table of the Lord this morning, we’re reminded of the fellowship and communion we have with our Lord Jesus Christ—our Savior. We are reminded of his sufferings, of his wrestlings, of his doubt, and fears, and yet his faith and trust in his Father’s sovereignty and plan. Jesus suffered immensely for our sake, but that is not the end of his story. He rose triumphant over the grave, and he is Lord over all! Glory, honor, and praise have the final word over Jesus’ story and our lives as well. And we invite you to celebrate that today—let Jesus meet you in your suffering; let his wounds speak to your wounds; and let his resurrection power give you life!

This table is a weekly, physical reminder—of God’s presence in your suffering and in your wrestlings. He is with us. He is our redemption. He is our comfort. He is our assurance that our end is glory.

We know that because of human sinfulness and brokenness, there is not one of us who has lived up to the ideal of what God created us for—to love him supremely and to love our neighbor as ourselves. So as we come to the table this morning, we come as a people in need of forgiveness and in need of redemption and salvation. And that is what Jesus offer us at this table—forgiveness, redemption, and salvation. His life for our life; his righteousness for our sin and brokenness.

Prayer

Most merciful God,

we confess that we have sinned against you

in thought, word, and deed,

by what we have done,

and by what we have left undone.

We have not loved you with our whole heart;

we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

We are truly sorry, and we humbly repent.

For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,

have mercy on us and forgive us;

that we may delight in your will,

and walk in your ways,

to the glory of your Name. Amen.