

Suffering – an Advent Study



Session 1. Why do we Suffer: the Suffering of Job?

Read these Quotations

“The real problem is not why some pious, humble, believing people suffer, but why some do not.” C.S. Lewis, “The Problem of Pain”

““Let me implore the reader to try to believe, that God, who made these deserving people, may really be right when He thinks that their modest prosperity and the happiness of their children are not enough to make them blessed: that all this must fall from them in the end, and if they have not learned to know Him they will be wretched. And therefore He troubles them, warning them in advance of an insufficiency that one day they will have to discover.

He makes their life less sweet to them. If God were proud He would hardly have us on such terms: but He is not proud, He stoops to conquer, He will have us even though we have shown that we prefer everything else to Him, and come to Him because there is 'nothing better' now to be had.” C.S. Lewis, “The Problem of Pain”

“We can rest contentedly in our sins and in our stupidities; and anyone who has watched gluttons shovelling down the most exquisite foods as if they did not know what they were eating, will admit that we ignore even pleasure. But pain insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” C.S. Lewis, “The Problem of Pain”

****With someone else, discuss what their meaning for you and the extent to which they resonate with how you think about suffering and pain.**

The first question many people ask when they find themselves in any sort of distress is: *'Why me? Why has this happened to me?'* It's a question asked throughout the book of Job, as Job and his friends try to make sense of all the calamities that befall him. It all seems so unjust!

The book starts: *"There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil"*. In spite of that, he endures suffering at every turn: his possessions are destroyed, his children killed, and his health ruined. Job doesn't understand his suffering and anguish. His wife doesn't understand his suffering and offers bad advice. His friends don't understand his suffering and eventually turn on him.

It can be difficult to cope with suffering when it touches us or those we love. There's a view amongst some Christians that: *"If you really love God and do your best to serve Him, your life will be free from suffering."* This notion has been around since before the time of Jesus, but has no basis in either Scripture or experience. Many good people in the Bible endure tremendous suffering and the same is true in people's lives today.

Like Job, his wife and friends, we struggle with the question: *"Why am I or those I love suffering?"* We want to know why. That's why the age-old book of Job still speaks to us today. Job addresses the question: *"Why does God allow His people to suffer?"* So let's try to gain some understanding of this question by looking at the characters in Job's story. Each character offers an explanation as to why Job is suffering or a response as to how he should react.

Suffering is Punishment for Sin

There was a widespread belief, in both Old and New Testament times, that suffering was a punishment for specific sins. Our word 'pain' comes from the Latin *'poena'*, meaning 'punishment'.

***Read one of Job 4 8 11 20 or 22 and then discuss with someone else how you feel about the idea of Suffering as Punishment for Sin, looking for examples from Scripture and your lives.*

At first Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite, grieve with him in silence for seven days. They do what friends should do with a hurting friend; they share his pain. But then they turn on him and try to persuade him that his suffering is due to some terrible sin he's committed and try to convince him to repent.

In Job 2:3 God stresses that Job is suffering "*without any reason.*" This verse shatters the myth that suffering is *always* the result of sin. God makes it plain that suffering isn't *always* the direct result of sin. Although we may suffer for things that we've done, suffering certainly isn't always our fault.

Suffering is Punishment for Pride.

When the three friends can't convince Job that his suffering is the result of his own sins they stop speaking. Then the young man Elihu confronts Job.

***Read Job 33 and 35 and then discuss with someone else the passage and the proverb that "Pride comes before a fall", looking for examples from Scripture and your lives.*

Elihu says that Job is a good man who's allowed himself to become proud. So God's making him suffer to humble him. It's true that God can use suffering to humble us and 'purify' our faith. But there's no hint in this story that God intended Job to suffer in order to humble him.

Have you ever heard Christians (or others) say something like:

1. You're suffering because you haven't confessed all your sins.
2. God's not answering your prayers because you don't have enough faith.

***Discuss these suggestions and see if you can think of any Biblical evidence one way or the other in relation to each of them.*

Jesus suffered during the last days of His life, but He never sinned.

The Bible shows us that God sometimes chooses not to heal despite great faith and fervent prayer. God didn't answer Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane

to “*take this cup away from me*”. God didn’t answer the apostle Paul’s prayer to remove his thorn in the flesh.

God sometimes has a higher purpose in mind for suffering that we can’t comprehend at the time. God uses suffering to develop our faith and mold our character. We can only get to Easter through Good Friday. We can only experience God’s strength through our weakness.

Suffering sometimes has no explanation

The reason for Job’s sufferings are a mystery to everyone in Job’s life. Job’s wife doesn’t understand. His friends don’t understand. Job doesn’t understand and struggles with the question: Why? As much as with the pain of his suffering.

As Job asked the question “*Why, God?*” he couldn’t find God in the midst of his pain (Job 23:1-9). Job was so overwhelmed with his pain that he couldn’t feel God’s presence. Job felt abandoned by God. Job’s inability to find God in the midst of his pain was his biggest struggle. It was far more painful than the physical and emotional pain he was feeling.

During his horrific suffering, Job’s faith was severely tested. Job wavered at times spiritually, but he endured the test of faith because he trusted in God even when life made no sense. Job had a courageous faith in God. He learned to trust in God even when he didn’t understand. Sometimes we simply have to say: God, I’m putting my life in your hands. I’ve done everything I know to do. You take control.

The most difficult spiritual truth in the book of Job is: God sometimes allows His people to suffer without explanation. As finite human beings, we can’t always understand why God lets us suffer. Yet we know that God is all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful.

Sometimes God’s actions are beyond our understanding. We can’t always understand how God is working in our lives (Romans 11:33; 1 Corinthians 2:16). Unless God chooses to explain Himself — and many times He does not we will not understand His purpose in allowing us to suffer. Some of our questions will remain unanswered on this side of eternity.