

Where is God when it hurts? Sovereignty and Suffering Job 1 & 2

Please review this week's catechism question

INTRODUCTION

Scott Hafemann, in his book, "The God of Promise and the Life of Faith" tells how his four year old son Eric was playing catch with his older brother. A wildly thrown ball hit Eric on the head and Scott quickly responded to his crying child with a word of comfort. He said, "We can sure be thankful that God kept the ball from hitting you in the eye. Think of how God was watching out for you! He really loves you." To which Eric replied between sobs, "Then why didn't God stop the ball *before* it hit me?" He goes on to say this about the "problem of evil", "Responding to suffering and evil, and eventually death is the challenge of life. Eric was right. Faced with the horrendous evil that permeates our world, no problem is as perplexing and painful as the problem of reconciling God's absolute, sovereign power with his all-encompassing love. The existence of evil seems to force us to limit one or the other. If God is all-powerful, then he cannot be all loving. If he is all loving, then he must not be all-powerful. As John Hick put it, 'If God is perfectly loving, he must wish to abolish evil; and if he is all-powerful, he must be able to abolish evil. But evil exists; therefore, God cannot be both omnipotent and perfectly loving.' If God is both sovereign and loving, then evil, all evil, must somehow fit into God's ultimate, good, and perfect plan. But can we really conclude that the evil in the world around us, from genocide to child abuse, from cancer to starvation, is somehow part of God's sovereign, loving will for his creation? And can we *worship* such a God?"

Has the reality of suffering and evil ever caused you to question the existence of God?

Has the reality of suffering and evil ever caused you to question the power and justice of God?

Has the reality of suffering and evil ever caused you to question the love of God?

In many ways, there is no more disturbing problem than the problem of reconciling faith in an omnipotent, just and loving God with the presence of evil. In this lesson we are going to get the outline of how the Bible describes God's relationship to evil and suffering by examining Job 1 & 2.

STUDY

1. Let's begin by describing the facts of Job's suffering. What did he suffer? How does he describe his condition in v. 21 and then in 3: 20-26? (See 1: 13-19 & 2:7-8) Imagine how you would feel.

He lost all of his wealth and all of his servants and all of his children and his health. He describes himself as being in the condition he came from his mother's womb, naked. He has no peace, no quietness, no rest, but only turmoil.

2. According to Job's "friends", why did this happen to him? How do they resolve the tension between God's justice, love, power and the existence of suffering? See 8:3-4 & 22: 5-11 examples of their reasoning.

Job is suffering because he did evil. They are convinced that all suffering is deserved and so if you are suffering it is because you have done evil. This also means that if you are enjoying prosperity, then you are "living right". God is perfectly just and loving and powerful. He always gives everyone exactly what he or she deserves. He loves the righteous and hates the wicked and always expresses his judgment by giving to each person according to what he or she deserves.

3. What do we know about Job from 1:1, 4-5, 8, 2:3 & 42:7-9?

Job is a righteous man. He is blameless before God. He regularly prays for his children and offers sacrifices. This means that he knows that God accepts people not due to their own righteousness but because of his promises sealed by the blood of atonement. He is living by faith

in Christ who is to come. He worships God when he suffers and only speaks what is right concerning in relation to his suffering.

4. According to what God says in 2:3, what is the reason for Job's suffering? What does this mean?

He says that the suffering of Job is for no reason. The suffering that Job experienced was not due to any sin in him. God is not dealing with Job according to justice. There is no reason in Job for this suffering.

5. Does God ever bring suffering upon people because of the evil they do? See 2 Samuel 12: 7-14 which is God's response to David after he committed adultery with Bathsheba and then tried to cover up the pregnancy and birth of the adulterous child by murdering her husband and then marrying her. See also Romans 2: 5-11.

Some of the suffering we see in this present age is a direct result of the sin that people do. Sometimes God punishes sin in this life with some form of misery. In David's case the child of the adultery died and then there were years of unrest and treachery among his own children. One of his own sons tried to kill him and take the kingdom from him. At the last day, the "day of God's wrath", God will execute perfect justice; every person will be rewarded according to what they have done. Those who are self-seeking, who reject the truth and follow evil, will experience the perfect wrath and anger of God forever in hell. Those who have persisted in doing good in order to obtain glory, honor and immortality will receive eternal life. NOTE: Someone may wonder how you tell if the suffering that you are experiencing is due to your sin or if it is "for no reason" like Job. This is a huge question and the answer is very long and complicated in the sense that it would require looking at dozens of passages and trying to put them all together. We will address this question in the coming weeks. For now all of us should be aware that when we suffer we should always take note of the fact that we may be suffering like David and not Job. We should seek the Lord and ask him to reveal any "wickedness" that is in us and then repent of it. Frankly, as we will see, self-examination is one of God's good purposes in sending the suffering. I wouldn't bring up this issue, but only respond if someone else brings it up. The error of Job's friends isn't that they say that God punishes the wicked. Their error is that they believe all suffering is caused by our own sin and this is just not true. It

is especially not true in the case of Job. They also don't understand that final and ultimate justice will not come until the end.

6. According to Job 1: 11, 20-22, 2:3, 5, 9-10, 6:4, 9:7-10, 12:9-10, 13: 20-27, etc., who did this to Job?

What the book of Job tells us is that it was God's will and purpose that Job suffer exactly as he did. Satan, Job, his "friends" and God himself affirm that all this suffering is from God's hand. God wanted Satan to do what he did to Job. God wanted the Sabeans to kill Job's servants and steal his oxen and donkeys. God wanted "the fire of God" to fall from the sky and burn up Job's sheep and servants. God wanted the Chaldeans to kill his servants and steal his camels. God wanted the strong wind to sweep in off the desert and to cause Job's son's house to collapse and thus to kill all ten of Job's children. God wanted Job's body to break out in boils. You cannot read Job and say that evil and suffering is not what God wants. Evil doesn't happen because God limits his sovereignty. Evil happens expressly because God is so powerful he is able even to cause the evil done by his enemies to serve his good purposes while he never does an act of evil.

7. According to Job 1:12-19 and 2: 6-7 who did this to Job?

Satan and humans are the direct cause of the evil done to Job. In vv. 12-19 all the disasters that happen to Job and his children are clearly Satan's doing. God places Job's family and possession in Satan's hands and immediately all of these evil things happen to Job. Satan sends "the fire of God" from the sky, the Sabeans and Chaldeans, and the wind. Not only does Satan do evil, but the Sabeans and the Chaldeans also do evil. These humans murder Job's servants and steal his flocks and herds. In 2:6-7 God again places Job in Satan's hands and then Satan goes out and afflicts Job with boils from his head to his feet.

8. Did Satan want to harm Job? Did the Sabeans and Chaldeans want to kill and steal? Were they in any way coerced by God into doing something they did not want to do?

Yes, both Satan and the human agents did exactly what they wanted to do. They were not in any way “forced” to act as they did. Therefore, they are guilty of evil and accountable for it.

9. How can this be? Does God then do evil? Is he a capricious despot, like the Greek gods and goddesses? How can God punish demons and humans who do evil, when they are doing what God wants?

Dr. Wayne Grudem says, “...in all these passages (that say that God caused evil events to happen, like here in Job) it is very clear that Scripture nowhere shows God as directly doing anything evil, but rather as bringing about evil deed through the willing actions of moral creatures. Moreover, Scripture never blames God for evil or shows God as taking pleasure in evil, and Scripture never excuse human beings for the wrong they do. However we understand God’s relationship to evil, we must never come to the point where we think that we are not responsible for the evil we do, or that God takes pleasure in evil or is to be blamed for it. Such a conclusion is contrary to Scripture. There are literally dozens of Scripture passages that say that God (indirectly) brought about some kind of evil... Yet it must be remembered that in all of these examples, the evil is actually done not by God but by people or demons who choose to do it.” (Systematic Theology, pp. 322-323)

He uses the illustration of a play to show the relationship between God’s will and human or demonic will. “In the Shakespearean play “Macbeth”, the character Macbeth murders King Duncan. Now... the question may be asked, “Who killed King Duncan?” On one level, the correct answer is “Macbeth.” Within the context of the play he carried out the murder and is rightly to blame for it. But on another level, a correct answer to the questionwould be, :William Shakespeare”: he wrote the play, he created all the characters in it, and he wrote the part where Macbeth killed King Duncan. It would not be correct to say that because Macbeth killed King Duncan, William Shakespeare did not kill him. Nor would it be correct to say that because William Shakespeare killed King Duncan, Macbeth did not kill him. Both are true.”

He concludes his discussion on the relationship of God to evil in this way, “We have to come to the point where we confess that we do not understand how it is that God can ordain that we carry out evil deeds

and yet hold us accountable for them and not be blamed himself. We can affirm that all of these things are true, because Scripture teaches them. But Scripture does not tell us exactly how God brings this situation about or how it can be that God holds us accountable for what he ordains to come to pass. Here Scripture is silent, and we have to agree with Berkhof that ultimately “the problem of God’s relation to sin remains a mystery.” John Calvin admonishes us, “When we do not grasp how God will to take place what he forbids to be done, let us recall our mental incapacity, and at the same time consider that the light in which God dwells is not without reason called unapproachable (1 Tim. 6:16).” (The Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. 1, p. 234)

Augustine, the great pastor and theologian of the 5th century said it this way, “For through the bad wills of evil men God fulfills what he righteously wills...in a wonderful and ineffable manner nothing is done without God’s will, not even that which is against his will. For it would not be done if he did not permit it; yet he does not unwillingly permit it, but willingly; nor would he, being good, allow evil to be done, unless being also almighty he could make good even out of evil.” (Quoted by Calvin in the Institutes, Vol. 1, pp. 234-235)

In conclusion: Humans make willing choices according to their own desires for which they are accountable and God so governs those choices that they always serve his infinitely wise, loving, and just purposes, while he himself is never guilty of doing evil.

I would encourage everyone to read Wayne Grudem’s chapter on “God’s Providence” in his “Systematic Theology”, especially pp. 322-331.

10. Why did Satan want to make Job suffer? See 1:9-11 & 2:4.

He wanted to dishonor God by causing Job to curse God and he wanted to destroy Job by causing him to sin and thus incur the wrath of God against him. He wanted to prove that the Lord is not valuable in himself and not worthy of love, trust and obedience. He wanted to display how pitiful God is in that the only way any creature will love God is if God bribes him. Satan’s entire motive was to mock God and to destroy people. This is always his motive. He hates God and wants God to be

hated. He hates those made in God's image and wants God to destroy us. He delights in the true God being despised, distrusted, and hated.

11. Why did God “permit” this suffering?

Scott Hafemann says, “Satan asks the theological question of the book in 1:9, ‘Does Job serve God for nothing?’ Job’s suffering, God counters, will demonstrate that Job serves God for the worth found in serving God alone, but ‘only through pain and loss can this question of God’s worth be answered.’” God seeks to show that Job does serve God for no reason other than the worth of God himself. His aim is to both display the reality of Job’s faith and the worth of his own name. The suffering comes to Job, as it comes to all God’s people, for the ultimate and highest good of Job and for the glory of God.

12. What questions does this discussion leave you with?

13. What has been the overall effect of this lesson on how you think and feel about God and the events of your life?