

WHY DO WE SUFFER?

Leader pages on pp. 138-141

THE POINT:
WE MAY NOT KNOW WHY WE SUFFER, BUT GOD MEETS US IN OUR SUFFERING.

JOB 30:26-31; 42:1-6

^{30:26} But when I hoped for good, evil came; when I looked for light, darkness came.
²⁷ I am churning within and cannot rest; days of suffering confront me.
²⁸ I walk about blackened, but not by the sun. I stood in the assembly and cried out for help.
²⁹ I have become a brother to jackals and a companion of ostriches.
³⁰ My skin blackens and flakes off, and my bones burn with fever.
³¹ My lyre is used for mourning and my flute for the sound of weeping.

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MEMORY VERSE

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^{42:1} Then Job replied to the LORD:
² **I know that you can do anything and no plan of yours can be thwarted.**
³ You asked, "Who is this who conceals my counsel with ignorance?" Surely I spoke about things I did not understand, things too wondrous for me to know.

⁴ You said, "Listen now, and I will speak. When I question you, you will inform me."
⁵ I had heard reports about you, but now my eyes have seen you.
⁶ Therefore, I reject my words and am sorry for them; I am dust and ashes.

KEYWORDS

No plan of yours can be thwarted (42:2)—God is the omnipotent Sovereign of His creation; He knows the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:10). No creature can derail God’s plans and purposes.

I am dust and ashes (42:6)—Both dust and ashes were used by people to express grief, humility, anxiety, despair, and repentance. The first human was made by God from dust (Gen. 2:7).

HOW DOES GOD USE SUFFERING IN OUR LIVES?

In my various interactions with non-believers, there is a specific argument I hear frequently as they attempt to dismiss belief in God.

Either God is a loving God, or He is an all-powerful God, but He cannot be both. If He was a loving God, He would not allow suffering. And since suffering exists, He is either not loving and doesn't care, or He is not powerful enough to stop it.

To make an argument like that, people have to start with certain assumptions. One assumption is that God is the cause of all suffering. Another assumption is that He is unreliable and randomly imposes suffering on people. A third assumption is that there is never any purpose in suffering. In addition to those assumptions, people also have to suppose that their personal definition of suffering applies to every person and circumstance. Of course, none of these are true.

An understanding of suffering requires much deeper thinking which the Bible helps us to do through the life of one who suffered. We know him as Job. This Old Testament suffering servant is a great starting point for our questions on suffering. So, what can we learn about suffering from Job's life?

Awareness our Need // Job 30:26-31

The story of Job's life opens with Satan asking God for permission to test Job in order to expose the shallowness of Job's faith, and God permits Satan to do so. Job was stripped of nearly everything he held dear, including his possessions, his children, and even his health. Job's closest friends came to comfort him, but instead they criticized him. Of course, Job remained faithful, but in his suffering, he questioned God.

We hear Job's despair in these verses. He had lived an upright, righteous life, and he had "hoped for good," but he experienced just the opposite. In the heart of what Job was feeling is a question that, no doubt, we have all asked at one time. It is a universal question. Why am I suffering?

Job's life points to one reason for suffering: It is the direct work of Satan himself. In the opening chapters of the book of Job, God allowed Satan access to Job's life to test him. We may not know all the reasoning behind God's permission, but we do know that Satan is able to operate in that way.

There is a more basic reason suffering exists, and it is explained in the story of the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Before they sinned, God's creation



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was perfect. But when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and sin entered the world, all of creation was corrupted—both the natural world and the human spirit. At that point, evil entered the picture and became the source of all kinds of suffering. All of creation fell because our ancestors disobeyed God.

Evil is in the world, but our own personal disobedience can be a reason for our suffering. In Deuteronomy 28, God revealed the blessings of obedience and the curses for disobedience. In this, God revealed the nature of His righteousness and justice, and how suffering will surely result when we disobey Him. Unfortunately, even when we haven't done wrong, we can still suffer as the result of other people's evil choices. There are those who do not care how their choices affect others. With that, they do things that not only cause suffering in their own lives, but in others as well.

Job was now suffering and saw his future go up in smoke. Previously he had been prosperous, and he totally expected that he would have a long and joyful life. But what he came to experience was evil, darkness, affliction, loss, and mourning.

In the next chapter, Job 31, we see that Job was a man who tried to do what was right, not just for himself, but for others. Previously he had been able to bring encouragement and hope to others, but now he was alone and unable to find encouragement and hope in his own heart. Instead of being with others who he could help, he was now "a brother to jackals and a companion of ostriches."

THOUGH MOST PEOPLE PREFER NOT TO SUFFER, WHAT ARE WAYS WE SUFFER THAT GOD CAN USE FOR OUR GOOD?

Increases our Understanding // Job 42:1-3

In Job 38, God finally responded to Job. For four chapters, God asked Job question after question, but He never gave Job a clear reason for his suffering. Instead, God chose to reveal more of Himself to Job. In those four chapters, God spoke of how His ways were well beyond Job's understanding. He specifically described His immense power in being able to establish the all of creation. He then challenged Job to give a rational argument as to why he felt qualified to judge God's motives and actions.

In Job 42:1-3, Job's eyes were opened as he realized he was not qualified to judge God. He recognized that God may actually have legitimate reasons for allowing suffering that he was not qualified to question. "Surely I spoke about things I did not understand, things too wondrous for me to know."

WITHOUT SUFFERING, HOW COULD OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD BE NEGATIVELY IMPACTED?



DIGGING DEEPER THE POWER OF SUFFERING

In today's world, we can't escape suffering. It's all around us and often causes people to lose hope in God because they feel He shouldn't allow it to continue. In God's original plan before sin, there was no suffering. In the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve lived in intimacy with God and creation. But Satan interrupted all of that, and his plans haven't changed from the garden to Job's life, to Jesus's persecution and death. But Genesis 50:20 applies here, because what Satan "planned evil against me [us]; God planned it for good." Suffering is the tool that God uses to grow us spiritually, making us faithful followers of Christ. But more importantly suffering is the jewel in our crown that makes our relationship with God stronger and more intimate. This happens because when we are going through something we turn to God for His love and care, which He extends to us, because there is nowhere else to go.

How does this truth provide you with greater insight on suffering?



And, without a doubt, God can bring about positive outcomes from suffering. While suffering, by definition, is not pleasant, it is not totally without redeeming value. So just what are some of the possible positive outcomes that may result from suffering?

- **Deeper insights.** Suffering can cause a person to have deeper insights into his or her personal relationship with God. Job at first believed that since he followed God and lived a good life, God would allow him to be prosperous and blessed in this world. But he didn't realize the full scope of God's being, and his lack of understanding created roadblocks in his relationship with God. In his suffering, Job came to realize his shortcomings.
- **A witness to unbelievers.** Suffering can give believers an opportunity to witness to non-believers. We see this in Acts 16. Paul and Silas were preaching in Philippi when Paul cast an evil spirit out of a fortune-teller. This woman was a slave who made money for her master through her occultic practice. When that ability was taken away, the slave master was angry and complained to the authorities, who then had Paul and Silas beaten and thrown into prison. Yet during their overnight stay in prison, the jailer heard the gospel, and he and his entire family were saved (Acts 16:16-34).
- **Bring us to God.** Suffering can lead a non-believer to turn to God. My own personal

conversion came when I was a teenager and had an encounter with the law. In my case, it was a minor traffic offense, but it was a traumatic enough experience for me to turn to God for relief.

- **Make us more like Jesus.** Suffering can cause believers to be conformed more closely to the character of Christ. The apostle Paul viewed his life as one suffering a great loss, but he acknowledged that he gained so much more! "Because of him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them as dung, so that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:8).

Suffering happens. It is a part of the human condition as we live in a fallen world. While we may not be able to understand why we suffer in any given circumstance, we can be certain that we can trust God, through every circumstance, and He will use it in our lives to fulfill His greater purpose.

Deepens our Relationship //

Job 42:4-6

There are some things that are beyond everyone's comprehension. God operates in an arena that lies beyond our natural existence. There are things about that spiritual reality which He has revealed to us, but there is much that is beyond our ability to completely understand—even for the most educated theologians. We can know God exists, but we can't know how He exists. We can know that He loves us, but we can never determine His full motivation for creating us.

The scope of Job's suffering is probably beyond the troubles most of us will experience in life, but we all face difficulties. As a result, we, like Job, want to know the "why" behind what we are going through. We may never learn the reason in this lifetime, but we can know and trust that God loves us, and He is working out a plan that will achieve His greatest purpose for our lives.

What we must recognize, though, is that the fullness of His ultimate purpose for us is simply beyond our ability to fully comprehend. As such, we must become willing to trust that He has it all in hand. How God is using all of the elements of His creation to accomplish His purpose is one of the

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great mysteries of spiritual reality. But learning to trust God and follow Him as we live through that mystery allows us to reach a place in our lives where true peace and fulfillment can be achieved.

That is what happened to Job. God never answered Job's question as to why he was suffering, but in his exchange with God, Job came to understand that having complete knowledge was not necessary. The only thing that truly mattered was that God was with him.

When Job came to that realization, he immediately repented and begged God for forgiveness. We see a similar dynamic in a teaching from Jesus in Luke 13:1-5. A group of people asked Jesus about the suffering Rome had inflicted upon a group of Galileans. Rather than directly answering their question about the suffering, Jesus called on His listeners to repent. As God did with Job, Jesus was letting His hearers know that a relationship with God was more important than understanding every detail about things they were incapable of understanding.

Regardless of the situation, we can experience the presence of God in our lives. And when we do, His presence overrules everything else.

WHAT ARE WAYS WE CAN FOCUS ON OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD WHEN WE SUFFER?

DID YOU KNOW?

Have you ever experienced new Christians after the "honeymoon" of their salvation experience? Often, they'll experience suffering which makes them wonder why life without God seemed easier than life with Him. Job provides an excellent model for Christians to understand a walk of faith is not a walk on easy street. As Job is introduced with an upright character, we know his suffering wasn't caused by failure to live by God's standards. Instead, his suffering was because he lived by God's standards. God allowed Satan to test Job because the accuser doubted Job would still serve God without His blessings and protection. What would God say if Satan asked about you? The important lesson learned from Job isn't how to suffer, but instead, through our suffering, how to direct all honor back to our faithful and loving God who is with us and carries us through our suffering. Job's assertion in Job 42:1, "I know that you can do anything and no plan of yours can be thwarted" can be ours when we endure suffering.

How has God's Word helped you to overcome times of suffering?

LIVE IT

How can we proactively prepare for suffering?

It's said that knowledge is power, but this can be more evident when we take action on the knowledge we acquire. Since we will inevitably experience suffering in this life, and it happens daily with illness, poverty, crime, and wars to name a few sources, we can proactively prepare our minds, hearts, and spirits for it. Here are ways to respond:



- **Confess sin.** All suffering is not a result of sin, but sin can lead to suffering. Ask God to reveal any sin in your life. Confess that and thank Him for His grace and forgiveness.
- **Honor Jesus.** Ask God to show you how He wants to strengthen you during a time of suffering. While dealing with difficulties, look for ways to honor Christ.
- **Encourage others.** Everyone's experience with suffering is different, but share with someone how God strengthened you and brought glory to Himself during a time of hardship or suffering.

DAILY READINGS

1. WHY ME, LORD? // ROMANS 5:3-4

Like Job, we often question God when we face trials or are going through the unimaginable. We are not exempt or alone in our suffering as shown in the Bible by many who experienced hardships. We respond to God with gladness in our joy and the Bible tells us how to respond to God in our sorrow. Paul tells us in Romans 5:3-4, we also rejoice in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope. Like Job, the Lord leads us to respond to Him in our suffering while also promising His presence in our trials. We should put our trust in God,

God wants us to grow as we go through our suffering so we may testify of His works.

2. PAIN AND JESUS IS REAL // 1 PETER 5:10-11

Like Job explains in verses 26-31 we too can experience deep pain in our suffering; feel the turmoil inside, and not have the rest needed for our souls. Sorrow will keep us awake at night and leave us feeling hopeless. Jesus is as real as the pain we feel. While the very circumstances that caused our pain could pass, the impact may last a lifetime. But God always has a plan even in our trials and promises to be with us in dark days where light does not seem possible. The apostle Peter tells us that “the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, establish, strengthen, and support you after you have suffered a little while.”

Rejoice through your suffering; Jesus will never leave your side.

3. JESUS OFFERS PEACE // JOHN 16:33

I have an anxiety disorder. I like to know what will happen, and I will plan as much as I can to prepare for the future. I do not like surprises, and I often familiarize myself with unfamiliar places through online pictures. However, life does not work this way most of the time. One of the verses that helps

me cope is John 16:33: “I have told you these things so that in Me you may have peace. You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world.” I feel comforted by this verse because Jesus is not offering surprises, instead, letting me know things that I do not like, that make me uncomfortable, that I do not understand will happen but I should have peace because He has conquered everything.

This truth is for all who trust and follow Christ.

4. GOD KNOWS YOUR SUFFERING // JOHN 14:27

When my father died tragically, I did not know what the days ahead would bring. Although he died a hero, saving another man’s life, I was angry. Like Job, I would cry out like the jackal and be silent like the ostrich. While sitting in my favorite coffee shop, I remember searching the Bible for the peace that passes all understanding. I read each verse about peace with the intention of returning to my car feeling better. But I did not. Bringing my grief into my relationship with God through prayer, being honest about how I was feeling, and leaning on God daily helped me to grow closer to Jesus. My suffering increased my dependence on Him.

Depending on Christ is one of His goals for us as we journey through life.

5. PROCESS PAIN WITH GOD // PROVERBS 3:5-6

My relationship with Christ dictates how I process pain. It does not mean I do not feel anything, that I am not hurt, or not shaken by the bad things that occur. It means I feel sad and have God to help me while I go through my season of suffering. In Job 42:13, when Job began to listen to God, he began to see God; his eyes were awakened and no longer acting from his emotions but completely in awe of his blessing. Proverbs guides us to lean not on our own understating, trust in the Lord and by acknowledging Him, He will make our paths straight. God should have our complete attention in all aspects of our lives.

Through His love He desires to strengthen us.