



## A Reverent Response to Unexplained Suffering

### **Main Point:**

Job was a blameless, upright man who feared God, yet God allowed him to suffer calamity after calamity of untold proportions at the hands of Satan, the accuser. Today, we see Job who had everything, lose it all, without explanation, and without a word of accusation against his God. The story of Job exposes our own struggle to understand God's justice in allowing the innocent to suffer.

### **Intro | Why Lord, why? Why am I suffering in this way?**

Have you ever heard yourself uttering, "Why Lord? Why am I suffering in this way?" or, out of the depths of despair, asking God, "What have I done to deserve this?"

Over the centuries such questions have been asked of God, though perhaps none so poignant as recounted in the story of Job.

It tells a story both troubling and unsettling, particularly because we don't know the answers to Who wrote it? When? Where? Why?

Yet, the greatest mystery of all lies in its effort to unravel the question of undeserved suffering: Why do bad things happen to good people?

Over the ages countless numbers have pondered that question. Why do babies die? Why are innocent people held hostage by terrorists? Why are faithful believers passed over for promotion while the wicked cheat and lie their way to the top?

The book of Job does not consider those questions with a theory. *It responds to them with a story.* We are invited first, to consider one man whose entire life collapsed around him and then to ask, 'Why did that happen and how did he respond?'

Job was a righteous and faithful man (Job 1:1), who was also very rich, (v2-3) but was also faithful concerning his family (v4-5). He was a truly wealthy man who loved God more than he loved his money.

A profound point is being made in these first few verses: By the world's standards, Job was successful; by God's standards, Job was righteous. This truth is crucial to understanding his story.

In fact, if I put it in another way, it will unsettle us even more.

What happened to Job, happened *because* he was a good man!

The story of Job makes no sense unless that statement is true. Job is a case study in the suffering of the righteous. As hard as it may be to understand, it was his righteousness and his abundant blessings that brought on his enormous suffering. Yet his suffering was undeserved in the truest sense of the word.

### **Question 1 | Does God run the universe by a strict code of fairness and justice?**

Fairness and justice rate highly in our thinking. If Job had been an evil, cruel person, we might well have cheered when his life fell apart. After all, he got exactly what he deserved! But, that's the problem.

Job did not deserve the calamity which God allowed to be brought upon him (1:20, 2:3, 10).

So, it makes us want to yell and scream, "How unfair!! God, how could you allow such a thing?"

But here's where I throw a spanner in the gears of our well-oiled theology of God's justice.

I don't believe the book of Job sets out to answer the why of suffering, nor the how to patiently endure trials, although those are certainly elements of the story.

I believe the book of Job seeks to illuminate the relationship between God and humanity – or, more specifically, the relationship between one man and his God – a relationship so deep that it withstood the concerted efforts of Satan to destroy it.

A relationship so deep that Job clung to it even when he didn't understand the reasons for his suffering.

A relationship was so deep that the true, but incomplete, advice of his friends failed to fracture it. Here was a relationship that became a model for all humankind.

I believe this story is especially relevant for us in this season of uncertainty, for it causes us to ask:

*Will I worship God when He doesn't do what I want Him to do?*

*Will I praise God when He allows something I don't like to happen?*

*Am I prepared to embrace the mystery of worshipping a God whom I don't understand, and who does not respond the way I believe he should?*

In the story of Job, God does not behave as we have come to would expect.

The writer is challenging our carefully constructed paradigms of why we worship God and why we obey Him.

The writer uses Job as an example of the perfect person to challenge these paradigms.

In fact, God calls him, "the greatest of all the men of the east" (1:8).

So, of course, as a righteous and blessed man, Job had lots of kids and lots of stuff because the two go together, don't they? I mean, 'good things happen to good people', right?

Indeed, that's what Proverbs leads us to believe, that the righteous are rewarded, and the wicked suffer (3:33).

So that takes us back to our earlier question, "Does God run the universe according to a strict code of justice?" Or, is it actually more complicated than that?

### **Question 2 | Would humans worship God if they received no reward?**

To help our understanding, the writer takes us into God's heavenly presence where He has called together not only the angels and members of the heavenly council but as well, Satan, the accuser. God inquires of Satan what he's been up to and the response comes,

*"I've been roaming about on the earth and walking around on it." (Job 1:7b)*

Or to use Peter's words, Satan had been prowling around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8)

Next comes the first of God's many unsettling actions.

God ponders aloud, "Have you noticed my servant, Job? There is no one like him in all the earth. He is blameless and upright. He is loyal to me and avoids anything to do with you." (Job 1:8 *paraphrased*)

Why would God draw Satan's attention to His faithful friend Job?

Remember, the main thrust of this story is God's relationship with Job. Here, and again later, God speaks well of his friend Job. (2:3)

Being true to his nature, Satan seizes the opportunity to accuse Job's loyalty to God as being entirely self-serving. Satan taunts God, 'does Job worship you for nothing? If you take all that he has from him, he would curse you to your face' (1:11, 2:5 *paraphrased*).

The heavenly host looks on in stunned silence. Is Satan correct? Does Job only worship God because of the blessings he has received? God looks on with the conviction of one who knows the reality of their relationship.

So, God takes up Satan's challenge. Satan, the accuser, is given power to afflict Job in ways of his choosing, on one condition, that his life must be spared (1:12b). God puts everything on the line based on His friendship with Job and Job's faith in His God.

Well, chaos erupts. In one day, Job loses his workers, his wealth, his livestock and his children (Job 1:14-19). Before long, Satan inflicts Job with painful festering sores from his feet to his head.

Now the heavenly host holds its collective breath ---- How will Job respond?

### **Question 3 | How do we respond when unexplained calamity hits us?**

Job is enveloped in suffering. He doesn't know why. His wife doesn't know why ... and nor do his friends.

So remarkable is Job's response, it is well-worth exploring.

*"At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head"*(1:20). These are the actions of a man whose heart has been torn apart, public symbols of inner pain.

*"Then he fell to the ground in worship"*(1:21). In the midst of mourning, he praises his God.

This is what differentiates the child of God from the unbeliever. They weep; we weep. They grieve; we grieve. Our sorrow is just as real but the sorrow of the unbeliever is without hope whereas the sorrow of the child of God draws them to worship.

In the midst of his sorrow, Job makes his great statement of faith (1:21a):

*"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away."*

Job already knew - all that we have was given to us by God. He can take what is rightfully his at any time. Because He is God, He doesn't have to ask our permission, nor does he have to provide an explanation.

*"May the name of the Lord be praised"*(1:21b)

Job's faith now soars. He has lost everything. All he counted dear in life has been ripped from him. Yet, in the midst of his pain, Job praises God.

And here is his secret: *Job draws his argument for praise from the bitterness of suffering.* His loss drives him back to the goodness of God. Every pain is a reminder of how good God has been to him.

### **Application | Can we worship the God we do not understand?**

Satan's accusation of Job is the supreme question of life.

You served God in the sunshine, will you now serve Him in the shadows?

You believed him in the light of day, will you believe Him at midnight?

You sang His praises when all was going well, will you sing through your tears?

Our passage today ends with these amazing words: *"In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing"* (1:22). Job didn't ask why; he didn't accuse God of not loving him; he didn't claim his rights; he didn't curse God; and he didn't give up his faith. He simply said to himself, "If God takes from me, I will thank him that I had it to enjoy for a time."

The opening of Job's remarkable story seems to highlight three important points:

1. We need to steer away from giving simplistic answers to the problem of undeserved suffering – God's justice is more complicated than any pat answer.
2. We are encouraged to embrace the discomfort of not knowing the answer to why we suffer – can we handle the 'not knowing'?
3. In the times of calamity and distress the goodness of God's love shines most brightly – do we look for it?

The apostle Paul wrote:

*"Nothing can separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, not angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow – not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below – indeed, nothing in all creation will even be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus."* (Romans 8:38-39 New Living Translation)

When suffering comes your way, may the Lord give you the grace to affirm His sovereignty. Let your tears flow freely, and let God be your joy.

### **A Month of Daily Devotions on the book of Job**

For those who would like further reflection on the story of Job, a month-long devotional has been developed. This devotional journeys with Job through his long and arduous time of testing.

