

The Book of Job

Session 28: Theology of Suffering and the Book of Job

By John Walton

This is John Walton and his teaching on the Book of Job. This is session 28, Suffering and the Book of Job.

Introduction [00:22-1:03]

Now we can turn our attention to the theology of suffering in the book of Job. Even as we do so, remember that we've noted that the book is not really designed to help us to know answers for suffering and not really designed to give us a model for what suffering should look like, and how we should respond to it. It's only intending to help us to think about God appropriately when we are suffering. But still, we can outline a few of the important elements of the theology of suffering in the book of Job.

Levels and Types of Suffering [1:03-2:19]

When we talk about suffering, of course, we could be talking about numerous different levels. We could talk about physical suffering with chronic or debilitating pain or injury. We could talk about psychological suffering: grief, shame, anxiety, abusive or broken relationships. We could talk about circumstantial suffering, living with an eating disorder, HIV or a neurological disease. We could even talk about surrogate suffering as we care for the aged or the terminally ill, suffering because those who are near us suffer. Finally, we could think of systemic suffering as we consider those who are threatened by repressive regimes, victims of human trafficking, hunger, and disease. We see then that suffering exists on many, many different levels in our experience and in our world. Suffering can break us, and it's characteristic of the broken world in which we live.

Questions Suffering Raises [2:19-4:32]

So, any theology of suffering inquires how we think about God in connection to suffering. That's what a theology of suffering should do. So, we can consider issues like:

why God has created a world in which such suffering can exist? Why does he allow it to continue? Why is this happening to me? Is God trying to teach me something? Did I do something wrong? Those are some of the issues we need to address. Basically, how can a God who is all good and all-powerful and characterized by justice and compassion allow, let alone create, a world in which suffering is so pervasive?

Now, of course, the skeptics have their ways of looking at that. They say we're just making excuses for an inadequate God, that there either is no God or that such a God who would allow such things is not worthy of our worship.

If we pursue attempts to vindicate God, we would have to work under the assumption that he has to conform to some outside criteria, which he does not, and that we could sit at the judge's bench to determine whether he succeeded in meeting our expectations. We neither ask God to account for himself nor why our lives, or the world, are the way that they are. There's no theology of suffering that comes out of that. We ultimately want to know what the book of Job can help us to learn about how to think about God in light of suffering, whether personal or universal. So, let's approach that in connection with five perspectives.

Five Perspectives on Suffering:

1) Suffering is Universal for All Humankind [4:32-5:07]

Number one, suffering is the lot of all humanity. If you're not suffering now, the odds are that you will be eventually. Suffering is the lot of all humanity. And in that sense, it's not picking and choosing one person to suffer here and one person to suffer there. It's what we all corporately and individually experience, some more, some less obvious.

2) Suffering is a Contingency of a Creation in Process [5:07-7:54]

Number two, suffering is a contingency of the creation in process. We are not yet living in a world of full order, and we won't until the new creation. Suffering then is one of the expected contingencies because order has not yet been fully achieved. Both

non-order and disorder are responsible for suffering. God's design was to create us with the nervous system that warns of potential harm through what we experience as pain. That's how God created us. If our nervous system fails, we've got big problems. God created us with emotions, and through our emotions, we can experience hurt feelings. We couldn't be hurt if we couldn't feel anything, either physically or emotionally. Did we think it's a good thing that God created us with a nervous system and with emotions? Since we are capable of love, we are vulnerable to pain because love often eventuates in pain in this life. In this world, with these sorts of bodies, suffering is unavoidable. We have to build this into our expectations. Normal cannot be defined as a life free of suffering. That's not normal. Normal has to be redefined given the realities of creation in process. If we expect suffering, it won't seem anomalous when we experience it. That doesn't make suffering easier to bear, but it can affect our attitude about it. We have not been singled out for suffering. As a human race, it's what we experience.

3) Suffering Not Intrinsicly Connected to Sin [7:54-11:26]

Thirdly, suffering is not to be intrinsicly connected to sin. Suffering can, at times, be the result of disorder. Someone commits a sin, and someone else suffers for it, but it can also be experienced as a result of non-order incomplete creation. Some suffering is unarguably the direct natural consequence of sin. Unquestionably. God can use suffering as punishment for sin, but we may never presume that our suffering or anyone else's is an act of punishment by God. Only the prophetic voices in Scripture could identify what was God's punishment and what wasn't. We have no such prophetic voices. We can well believe that we will reap what we sow Galatians 6:7, but that does not allow us to draw a one-to-one correspondence between behavior and circumstances. Suffering can, however, lead us to evaluate our lives, to determine whether we're on the right path. Trusting in God's wisdom is the strongest counsel the Bible has to offer. It must suffice.

Trust refrains from asking, Why did God do such a thing? Or why did he allow that to happen? It takes us into territory in which no navigational tools exist to give us bearings. God is neither micro-managing every circumstance nor signing off on everything that takes place in your life or mine. Yet it would be a mistake in the opposite direction to think that he was distant and disengaged.

I even wonder about using terms like "allow" and "permit." I don't think we should be using them in a way to suggest blame for God. They're some of the only words we find that we can kind of remove him somewhat, but that's our language, and it's inadequate to account for explaining God.

John Polkinghorne has made the statement that "the suffering and evil of the world are not due to weakness, oversight or callousness on God's part, but rather they are the inescapable cost of a creation allowed to be other than God." "The inescapable cost of a creation allowed to be other than God."

4) Suffering as an Opportunity to Deepen Faith [11:26-14:18]

Number four, in a theology of suffering, perspectives that we can adopt. We can recognize that sometimes suffering can provide an opportunity to deepen our faith. Whatever amount of suffering any of us have experienced in our lives, that suffering has contributed to making us who we are, for good or ill. I would point you to Romans 5:3.

We cannot conclude on the basis of biblical teaching that God wants everyone to be healthy and happy. So, we only need to ask in faith for our situation to be resolved. God may not choose to do so. We can pray for healing for ourselves and for others. We should have faith that God can heal if he so chooses, but we're not in a position to make demands of him. When God speaks of bringing his people Israel through the waters, we have to understand that that's different from helping them avoid the troubled waters. He's going to see them through the troubled times. Perhaps it's more important for us to pray that God would strengthen us to endure the suffering and to be faithful to him throughout the time of trial or crisis rather than to take it away.

It's important that we not respond with disappointment in God. God does not fall short or suffer lapses in the execution of his purposes. If it seems to us that he has not met our expectations, the problem is not in him. We should re-examine our expectations. It's important for us to try to honor God when life is at its lowest. We should strive to trust him even when hope is gone. That's what God expects from us. We're in a world subject to suffering, and how we respond to it means everything.

5) Participating in Christ's Suffering [14:18-15:01]

Finally, a fifth perspective is that when we suffer, we participate in Christ's suffering. Christ was showing a different way that would bring triumph through defeat, to which the cross compellingly testifies. We should not always expect deliverance from enemies. I would direct you to Philippians 3:10. So, we can try to withstand our suffering as we imagine that we are participating in Christ's suffering.

Conclusion [15:01-15:49]

None of these suggest that we should expect suffering to be eliminated from our lives. It's the condition of our world and our human plight. We shouldn't look to blame God. We should look rather to what purposes can be served through our suffering as we testify to him in our lives. So, there's a bit of the theology of the book.

Now we want to turn our attention to summarizing the message of the Book of Job, and that will be in the next segment.

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