

The Book of Job

Session 28: Theology of Suffering and the Book of Job

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Abstract

In this session, Dr. John Walton outlines the theology of suffering within the Book of Job, emphasizing that the text is not designed to explain why suffering exists but to teach us how to think about God appropriately during trials. He describes suffering as a complex reality manifested across physical, emotional, and systemic levels and presents it as an unavoidable contingency of a creation still in process rather than an intrinsic punishment for personal sin. Ultimately, Walton presents five distinct theological perspectives, guiding believers to abandon simplistic transactional expectations and instead cultivate a profound trust in God's transcendent wisdom.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Theology of Suffering

A. Purpose of the Book of Job regarding suffering

1. It is not designed to provide definitive answers for why individuals suffer.
2. It is not intended to serve as a perfect model of what suffering should look like or how humans should respond.
3. The primary objective is to teach believers how to think appropriately about God in the midst of trials.

II. Levels and Types of Suffering

1. A. Physical suffering

Characterized by chronic pain, debilitating injury, or disease.

2. B. Psychological suffering

Encompasses emotional distress, grief, shame, anxiety, and broken relationships.

3. C. Circumstantial suffering

Living with specific long-term health crises or disorders.

4. D. Surrogate suffering

The vicarious pain experienced when caring for terminally ill or aging loved ones.

5. E. Systemic suffering

Large-scale oppression resulting from human trafficking, hunger, repressive regimes, and poverty.

III. Questions Raised by Suffering

A. Common human inquiries

1. Why did an all-good and all-powerful God create a world where suffering is so pervasive?
2. Why does God allow suffering to continue, and did the sufferer do something wrong?

B. The flaw in attempts to vindicate God

1. Assuming God must conform to external human standards of justice is a flawed approach.
2. Humans are not in a position to sit at the judge's bench and demand that God account for Himself.

IV. Five Perspectives on Suffering

A. Perspective 1: Suffering is Universal for All Humankind

1. Suffering does not selectively pick and choose individuals; it is the corporate and individual lot of all humanity.
2. Believers must expect suffering as a normal reality rather than an anomaly.

B. Perspective 2: Suffering is a Contingency of a Creation in Process

1. We live in an incomplete world where order has not yet been fully achieved; full order awaits the new creation.
2. Suffering arises from both non-order (incomplete creation) and disorder (evil).
3. God wisely designed human biology with a nervous system that registers pain as a warning of harm, making physical pain a necessary design feature.
4. Human capacity for love naturally brings vulnerability to psychological hurt; a life free of suffering is biologically and emotionally impossible.

C. Perspective 3: Suffering is Not Intrinsically Connected to Sin

1. While some suffering is a direct natural consequence of sin (disorder), we cannot draw a automatic one-to-one correspondence between behavior and circumstances.
2. Only biblical prophets had the authority to identify specific events as divine punishment; no such prophetic voices exist today.
3. John Polkinghorne describes suffering as the 'inescapable cost of a creation allowed to be other than God.'
4. Trusting in God's wisdom must suffice, rather than demanding explanations for why He allowed or permitted an event.

D. Perspective 4: Suffering as an Opportunity to Deepen Faith

1. Suffering shapes human identity and serves as a tool to deepen faith (Romans 5:3).
 2. Scripture does not support the idea that God wants everyone to be healthy and happy; believers cannot make demands of Him.
 3. God promises to bring His people through troubled waters, not to help them avoid the waters entirely.
 4. Prayer should focus on obtaining strength to endure and remain faithful rather than demanding the immediate removal of suffering.
 5. If God fails to meet our expectations, the problem lies in our expectations, not in Him.
- E. Perspective 5: Participating in Christ's Suffering
1. Experiencing suffering is a way of participating in Christ's own suffering (Philippians 3:10).
 2. The cross compellingly demonstrates a path that brings ultimate triumph through apparent defeat.

V. Conclusion

- A. Accepting the human plight
1. Suffering is an inevitable condition of our present, broken world.
 2. Instead of blaming God, believers should look to what holy purposes can be served as they testify to Him through their endurance.