

Dr. John Walton, Job, Session 28, 6-min. Video Overview

BiblicalLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome to this explainer. Today, we're diving into something that is, well, let's just be honest right up front. It's an incredibly heavy, universal reality.

We're talking about suffering. It's a profound burden. And if you happen to be carrying that weight right now, I really just want to acknowledge that reality right out of the gate.

Today, we're going to unpack the research of scholar John Walton on the book of Job. And a quick heads up, this isn't going to be some light, breezy look at a few comforting verses. Not at all.

Walton's work presents a massive paradigm shift in how we understand our pain. He doesn't offer cheap platitudes. Instead, he fundamentally changes how we look at God right in the middle of our absolute darkest moments.

It's the ultimate agonizing question, isn't it? Why does a good God allow suffering? It's that awful tension we literally all feel when facing unimaginable pain. And skeptics frequently point to this very question to claim that God is either inadequate, nonexistent, or just straight up not worthy of our worship. If he lets such terrible things happen, they look at the state of the world and conclude, you know, if God were truly all-powerful and all good, pain simply wouldn't exist.

And honestly, that's a completely natural human reaction to a very real problem. And that problem exists on so many devastating levels in our lived experience. Suffering can absolutely break us.

And as Walton points out, it's actually a defining characteristic of our broken world. I mean, think about it. We experience physical suffering like chronic pain or injury.

There's psychological suffering, bringing grief, shame, or intense anxiety. Then we have circumstantial suffering, living with a neurological disease or a severe disorder. But it doesn't even stop there.

There's surrogate suffering. This is that deep ache of caring for the aging or the terminally ill, where you're suffering simply because someone near you is suffering. And finally, systemic suffering.

People trapped by oppressive regimes, human trafficking, or hunger. It's pervasive. It's everywhere.

Okay, let's dive into this. Here is our roadmap for today's explainer. The reality of suffering, the unanswerable questions, a creation in process, disconnecting suffering and sin, and finally, deepening faith through trial.

We'll kick things off with section one, the deconstruction, the unanswerable questions. Any theology of suffering has to first address how we're fundamentally looking at God when things go completely wrong. And this brilliantly illustrates the massive, massive gap between what we want and what the biblical text actually offers.

See, our human expectation is that we demand an explanation. We want to put God in the hot seat, right? We set up outside criteria, we put God on trial, and we sit at the judge's bench to determine if he succeeded in meeting our expectations. But Walton points out that the book of Job isn't designed to give us a neat little model with all the answers.

Actually, scratch that. It doesn't give us the answers at all. Instead, the reality of the book is solely intended to help us think about God appropriately while we are suffering.

Walton argues that to understand this text, we have to completely change what we're demanding from God. So to help us reconstruct our understanding, Walton introduces five specific perspectives. These form a sort of intellectual and spiritual framework that we can use to process our reality.

We're going to walk through each of these step by step just to see how they totally reshape the view of our own lives. Let's start with the first two perspectives, humanity and a creation in process. Walton notes that suffering is universally the lot of all humankind.

If you aren't suffering now, well, odds are you eventually will. God isn't just randomly picking targets to punish. It's a shared human experience.

Now what's really fascinating here is how Walton frames this second perspective. He defines our current world as a creation in process, meaning we are not yet living in a world of full order. That won't happen until the new creation.

Because we live in this reality of non-order, suffering is an expected contingency. It's mathematically, fundamentally expected, because full order just hasn't been achieved yet. Just look at how this translates into our very biology.

God created us with a nervous system that warns us of harm through physical pain. He created us with emotions so we can actually feel. And because we are capable of giving and receiving love, we are inevitably vulnerable to emotional pain.

Because let's be real, love often eventuates in pain in this life. Walton really challenges us here. Do we honestly believe it would be better to be created without a nervous system, without emotions, and without the capacity to love at all? It's a package deal.

Walton argues that in this specific world, vulnerability is completely unavoidable. Which brings us to a radical redefinition. Normal cannot be defined as a life free of suffering.

Now building this reality into our expectations doesn't magically make suffering easy to bear. It still hurts, for sure, but it fundamentally changes our attitude. If we expect suffering as just part of a creation and process, Walton suggests the pain no longer feels anomalous.

We suddenly realize we haven't been maliciously singled out. We're literally just experiencing the human condition. This leads us right into the third perspective, disconnecting suffering and sin.

It's basic human nature to want to draw a straight line between our current pain and our past mistakes, but Walton urges extreme caution here. While it is true that some suffering is unarguably the direct consequence of sin- you know, someone breaks a rule, commits a wrong, and someone else suffers for it- a vast amount of suffering is simply the result of non-order. It's just the reality of an incomplete creation.

Walton suggests that we can never presume a one-to-one correspondence between our behavior and our circumstances. I mean, in the biblical text, only prophetic voices could definitively identify what God's specific punishment was, and we definitely don't have those prophetic voices sitting in our living rooms diagnosing our individual lives today. So the absolutely crucial point here is summarized beautifully by physicist and theologian John Polkenhorn.

I want to read this, and I just want you to let it sit with you for a second. 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.

I mean, wow, the profound weight of that observation is just incredible. Moving smoothly into the final two perspectives, deepening faith and participating in Christ. Here, we explore how the biblical text frames suffering not as a punishment but as an intense, completely uninvited opportunity to evaluate our lives and deepen our faith.

Let's move to how this builds into our prayer life. When things go wrong, our expected, totally natural prayer is to demand that God resolve the situation. We want Him to remove the troubled waters immediately, but the biblical prayer is often quite different.

When God speaks of bringing His people through the waters, it implies He'll be with them in the trouble, not necessarily that He'll help them avoid it entirely. Walton notes that perhaps the more vital biblical prayer is actually asking for the strength to endure the suffering and remain faithful rather than demanding the pain be taken away. And this is perhaps Walton's hardest truth.

It's so, so important that we don't respond with disappointment in God. Why? Because in Walton's framework, God does not suffer lapses in the execution of His purposes. He doesn't make mistakes.

So, if it seems that God hasn't met our expectations, this theology suggests the problem actually lies in our own faulty expectations. We have to re-examine what we're demanding from a creation that is, as we said, still in process. And this brings us to the fifth perspective, heavily emphasized in the New Testament book of Philippians.

The text suggests that when people suffer, they actually participate in Christ's suffering. The cross is presented as compelling testimony to an entirely different kind of victory. It's a victory that brings triumph through defeat.

It shows us that we shouldn't always expect deliverance from our enemies or from our pain in this lifetime, but that there is profound meaning in withstanding our trials alongside Christ. So, we arrive at the resolution, rethinking our normal. Walton's theology, drawn from the book of Job, doesn't eliminate our suffering.

It doesn't promise a pain-free life. But he argues that it can rescue us from the trap of constantly blaming God. It aims to free us from the exhaustion and anxiety of wondering if every illness or tragedy is a specific punishment.

Instead, it points us toward the singular goal of honoring Him when life is at its absolute lowest. I want to leave you with this final, deeply provocative question. At the end of the day, the entire message of the book of Job basically boils down to this.

Will we strive to trust even when hope is gone? In a world mathematically subject to suffering, our response to that pain matters infinitely more than fully understanding its origin. Think about your own expectations today. The text challenges us to ask: are we putting God on trial, or are we striving to trust in the midst of an incomplete creation?