

Dr. John Walton, Job, Session 28 – Podcast

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Hey everyone, and welcome back for another deep dive with us. This time we're going to be tackling the Book of Job and specifically looking at the theology of suffering. One of you actually sent us some excerpts from a lecture by John Walton on this very topic, and we thought this would be a great opportunity to kind of explore this together with all of you.

So get ready because I think this is going to be pretty fascinating. The Book of Job, it's not really about finding easy answers to the question of why we suffer. It's more about how do we think about God when we find ourselves going through really tough times.

Yeah, that's a really great way to put it. It's not a how-to guide for suffering or anything like that. It's not going to give us like a list of reasons why bad things happen to good people.

So no quick fixes. Not exactly. But that doesn't mean that the Book of Job isn't relevant to us today.

I mean, it grapples with some really tough questions that we all have about God, especially when life feels unfair, or you're going through a period of suffering. Well, it sounds like this is something you've been thinking about quite a bit. What stood out to you so far from John Walton's perspective on this? Honestly, I think what I find most helpful about Walton's approach is how he helps us to see suffering as part of a bigger picture.

Like we tend to think of suffering as this anomaly, you know, like this interruption to how things should be. But Walton actually makes a really compelling case that suffering is kind of woven into the fabric of creation itself. Okay, I'm intrigued now.

Tell me a little bit more about what you mean by that. Like how can something as tough as, you know, suffering possibly be part of the plan? Well, he uses these terms non-order and disorder. So non-order refers to the inherent incompleteness of creation.

So, like, imagine a house that's under construction. There are exposed wires and unfinished walls. It's not necessarily dangerous, but it's not fully functional yet.

So I see where you're going with this. It's like the world is a work in progress. That's right.

And then there's disorder, which is really the stuff that throws a wrench in the works, the things that go wrong because of human choices or just the inherent chaos of the world. It's going back to that house analogy. Disorder is like when someone trips over a toolbox and spills paint everywhere.

Okay, I think I'm following so far. But how does this relate to our own personal experiences of suffering? Are you saying that some of the pain that we endure is simply because the world isn't finished yet? In a way, yeah, but it goes even deeper than that. Walton points out that even our capacity for emotional pain, like heartbreak, grief, disappointment, all of those things, they're not mistakes.

They're actually woven into our very design as humans because we're capable of such deep love. That's an interesting way to think about it. So it's like our ability to love and our ability to hurt are two sides of the same coin.

You got it. It's like without the possibility of pain, we wouldn't be able to experience the fullness of love. Wow, that is a powerful thought.

It definitely challenges the way I usually think about suffering. I mean, we often associate pain with something being wrong. But what you're saying is that maybe it's just part of being human.

That's exactly it. And I know that's a tough pill to swallow sometimes, but it can also be really liberating. If suffering is just part of being human, then it's not about trying to avoid it at all costs.

It's about learning how to navigate it in a way that allows us to stay connected to God. I love that. Okay, so we're talking about suffering being built into creation itself, both that sense of non-order, the world being unfinished, and then disorder, the things that go wrong just because of chance or choice.

But I'm curious, how does this idea square with this common belief that suffering is always a direct consequence of sin, that whole you reap what you sow mentality? Yeah, that's a great question. And it's definitely something that Walton addresses in his lecture. He's very clear that we can't automatically equate suffering with divine punishment.

In fact, he argues that only biblical prophets were really in a position to make that kind of direct link between someone's actions and their hardship. Oh, thank goodness. Can you imagine like walking around trying to figure out what secret sin caused someone's misfortune? Right.

It would make everyday conversations super awkward. Totally. But even though we can't like play cosmic detective or anything, Walton does suggest that suffering can be a catalyst for self-reflection, not in a blaming way, but as more of an invitation to examine our lives, our choices, and how we're living out our values.

So it's less about what I did to deserve this and more about what I can learn from this? Exactly. Sometimes those answers don't come right away. It might take time, even years, to really understand the purpose or the meaning behind our suffering.

But even in that uncertainty, we can trust that God is with us. He hasn't abandoned us. And he's using even these difficult experiences to shape us and to draw us closer to him.

It's interesting because we often think of suffering as something that weakens our faith. But Walton actually suggests the opposite. He says it can actually strengthen our faith.

How does that work? He uses this really powerful metaphor of suffering as a crucible, that container that's used to melt down metal and purify it. So the idea is that our trials, as painful as they are, can actually refine us. They strip away the impurities and make us stronger and more resilient in the end.

So it's almost like saying that the times when we feel like we're breaking are actually the times when we're being remade, like we're being reshaped into something stronger and even more beautiful. That's a beautiful way to put it. Think about a time in your own life when you went through something really tough, maybe a loss, a setback, a period of intense struggle.

Didn't you come out on the other side of that experience a little bit different, maybe a little wiser, a little more compassionate, a little more aware of your own strength? Yeah, I can definitely think of times when that's been true for me. Even though, you know, I wouldn't wish those experiences on anyone. They definitely forced me to dig deep and discover resilience I didn't even know I had.

That's the paradox of suffering. It can reveal our deepest vulnerabilities, but it can also reveal our incredible capacity for strength and resilience. And it's often in those moments of weakness when we're stripped bare that we're most open to God's love and grace.

Yeah, I really like that. It's like when we're hurting, our hearts are more tender and more receptive to God's presence. And, you know, it makes me think about the people in my own life who are going through tough times right now.

Maybe the best thing I can offer them isn't answers or advice. Maybe it's just my presence, just being there with them in their pain and letting them know that they're not alone. That's such a beautiful and important point.

Sometimes the most loving thing we can do for someone who's suffering is to simply enter into that suffering with them, to listen without judgment, to offer comfort without trying to fix anything. You know, Walton calls this surrogate suffering. And it's a really powerful expression of empathy and solidarity.

That reminds me of the story of Job itself. Like when his friends finally show up, they spend a lot of time trying to explain his suffering to him, you know, like trying to come up with reasons why he might have deserved it. But in the end, it's Job's raw honesty, his willingness to wrestle with God in the midst of his pain, that was the most transformative.

Absolutely. And I think there's a valuable lesson there for all of us. Instead of trying to avoid suffering or explain it away, we can choose to lean into it, to let it teach us, to let it shape us, to let it connect us more deeply to God and to each other.

It's almost like saying that suffering, even though we might fear it or try to run from it, is actually a crucial part of what makes us human. I think that's a profound insight. It's in those vulnerable spaces, in those moments of shared pain and brokenness, that we often find our deepest connections, our most profound experiences of grace, and our greatest opportunities for growth and transformation.

This is giving me a lot to think about. But there's one more piece of this puzzle that I want to explore with you. So we've talked about how suffering is part of creation.

We've talked about how it has the potential to refine us and draw us closer to God. But Walton also mentions this idea that when we suffer, we actually participate in Christ's suffering. And that's a big concept.

Can we unpack that a little bit? Of course. And it's something that I think is often misunderstood. You know, we're not talking about earning salvation through our pain or trying to out-suffer each other.

It's more about recognizing the deep connection between Christ's suffering on the cross and our own experiences of suffering in this broken world. So it's not about seeking out pain or trying to make our suffering somehow worthy. It's more about understanding that Christ in his incarnation fully entered into the human experience, including all the pain and brokenness that comes with it.

Precisely. And by choosing to walk through that suffering, by willingly embracing the cross, Christ showed us that God is not distant or indifferent to our pain. He's right there with us in the midst of it all, sharing in our suffering and offering us his comfort and strength.

Welcome back, everyone, to the final part of our deep dive into the book of Job and, you know, this whole idea of the theology of suffering. I don't know about you, but it's been a very intense conversation, but also really insightful. I agree.

I think what's been most striking to me is how John Walton really challenges us to kind of reframe our entire understanding of suffering. Like, we tend to see it as this negative force, you know, something to be avoided at all costs. But what if instead we saw it as an opportunity, an opportunity for growth, for transformation, and for even a deeper experience of God's presence in our lives? Yeah, that's a pretty radical shift in perspective.

And I don't think it's an easy one, right? Like when we're in the middle of pain, it's totally natural to want to push it away, to numb ourselves, to do anything to escape it. But you're suggesting that maybe there's a different way. Exactly.

And I don't want to minimize the reality of suffering at all. It's painful, and it can be incredibly difficult to endure. But what Walton helps us see is that it doesn't have to be the end of the story.

You can actually be the beginning of something new and beautiful. You know, it's like those Kintsugi bowls. Have you ever seen those? It's that Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with gold.

The cracks aren't hidden. They're actually highlighted. Oh, yeah.

They become part of the object's beauty and history. I love that analogy. That's a perfect illustration of what Walton's talking about.

Our suffering, our brokenness, it doesn't have to define us. It can actually become a source of strength, resilience, and even beauty. So we've talked about how suffering can refine us, how it can draw us closer to God, how it can connect us more deeply to each other.

But there's one more idea that I want to circle back to, and that's this concept of participating in Christ's suffering. This is one of the most profound, and I think challenging aspects of Walton's lecture. It is.

It requires us to really wrestle with what it means to be a follower of Christ, you know, because it suggests that suffering isn't something we just endure passively. It's something we actively participate in. So how do we make sense of that? What does it actually mean to participate in Christ's suffering? Well, I think it starts with recognizing that Christ didn't come to Earth to offer us a life that's free from pain and suffering.

He came to share in our humanity fully, to experience the full spectrum of human emotions and experiences, including the difficult ones. And by doing so, he showed us that God is not distant or aloof from our pain. He's right there with us in the midst of it all.

So it's not about, you know, trying to earn brownie points with God by suffering more or trying to somehow out-suffer each other. It's more about recognizing that our suffering, however unique it might be, is connected to the larger story of Christ's suffering and redemption. Yeah, exactly.

And it's in that connection that we can find meaning and purpose in our pain, because we realize that we're not suffering alone. We're suffering with Christ. And in that shared experience, we can find comfort, strength, and ultimately hope.

You know, Walton quotes John Polkinghorne, who said that suffering and evil in the world are, and I'm just going to quote him here, the inescapable cost of a creation allowed to be other than God. And I don't know about you, but that phrase has just been echoing in my mind ever since I read it. Yeah, it's a powerful statement.

And I think what Polkinghorne is getting at is that for creation to truly be creation, for us to have free will, for love to be real, for goodness to exist as something distinct from God, there has to be the possibility of things going wrong. So suffering is like the shadow side of freedom, the price we pay for being able to choose to love, to experience life in all its messy, unpredictable glory. Exactly.

And because Christ entered into that suffering so fully, when we experience pain and hardship, we're not abandoned. We're actually connected to him in this really profound and mysterious way. It's a difficult concept to grasp, but I think there's a strange comfort in knowing that even in our darkest moments, we're not alone.

You know, this whole conversation has really challenged me to think differently about how I respond to suffering, both my own and the suffering of others. Like I've realized how often I try to offer quick fixes or easy answers when sometimes what's really needed is just presence. Just being there with someone in their pain, listening without judgment, offering comfort without trying to solve everything.

I think that's a really beautiful insight, and it speaks to the heart of what it means to be a compassionate and empathetic human being. We can't always take away the pain, but we can offer our presence, our love, and our support. It reminds me of something you said earlier about how suffering can be an opportunity to grow in compassion.

It's like when we've experienced pain ourselves, we're more attuned to the pain of others. We're more able to offer empathy and understanding because we've been there. That's so true.

And I think that's one of the most beautiful and redemptive aspects of suffering. It can break us open and make us more tender, more compassionate, more aware of the needs of those around us. Well, this has been quite a deep dive, and I want to thank you, our listener, for bringing this topic to the table.

It's been a profound and thought-provoking journey, for sure. It really has. And I hope this encourages all of you listening to keep exploring these questions because the mystery of suffering is something that we'll likely grapple with for our entire lives.

As we wrap up, I want to leave you with one final thought. If suffering is, as John Walton suggests, an inescapable part of creation, an inherent aspect of being human, how does that change the way you view your own pain and the suffering of others? What responsibility does that give you? It's something to ponder as we all move forward on our own journeys of faith and understanding. Thanks for joining us on this deep dive.

We'll see you next time.