

Why Does God Allow Pain?

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IF YOU'VE PUZZLED over this question – and don't care for simplistic answers – you'll like the honest way that the Old Testament book named Job considers God's mysterious ways.

It tells the story of a godly man who endured unimaginable pain and loss. First, Job's donkeys, camels, sheep and oxen die. Then his servants. Then his children. A short time later, painful sores cover Job from the soles of his feet to the top of his head, and his wife snarls: "Curse God and die!" Ouch! Plop, plop, fizz, fizz, oh what a relief it is – NOT! When you think it cannot get any worse, his friends -- and I use the term loosely – verbally abuse him. They are certain he must have committed some terrible wrong for God to punish him.

Have you experienced something similar? Maybe you've endured one hardship after another? Have you ever asked God, Why me? The author of the book of Job conveys several key concepts, which were true then and still are true today.

God is sovereign. In 1:6-12 and 2:1-6, when Satan questions God regarding Job's integrity (after God points him out as a blameless, upright and reverent man), God calls the shots. He tells Satan what he may and may not do. Satan has no power except for that which God allows. Satan is evil. Satan licks his lips with any chance to discredit God – as if this were possible – by inciting Job to curse God. Satan desires a throne above God's.

Suffering happens. First Job loses his belongings and wealth (1:13-17), and Job was a very wealthy man. Then all his children die in a roof collapse (1:19). Soon after, Job's health is hit hard. He sits in an ash heap scraping his sores with shards of broken pottery. What a lonely, pathetic picture!

Furthermore, in the face of almost-beyond belief suffering, it is possible to avoid sin. Like us, Job receives strength from God to honor him. His wife says, "Curse God and die." Job's answer shows depth of wisdom gained by intimacy with the One whom he reveres. He says, "Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?"

Friends may compound the pain. Each of Job's supposed friends – and a young man named Elishu – accuses Job of sinning and failing to repent, thus bringing on his suffering in the first place. In 21:34, Job tells his friends, "How can you console me with your nonsense? Nothing is left of your answers but falsehood." In their economy, God would allow only an

unrighteous man to suffer. Thus since Job is suffering, they propose, he must be unrighteous.

In addition, the greater the loss, the greater the grief. Surprising to me, Job says little of his material losses or of the deaths of his ten children. Rather, he grieves the loss of an intimate relationship with God. God chooses silence, but behind the scenes he is highly active in Job's life. Job says in 23:8-9, "If I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him. When he is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him." Job feels abandoned yet holds tight to God, trusting that this test by God will prove him as pure as gold.

As I read the book of Job, I question why God pointed Job out to Satan, why God allowed Satan to wreak havoc in his life, why Satan caused the death of Job's children but not his wife, and why Job hadn't had the foresight to select better friends, ones who wouldn't attack him in the midst of trouble. I also wonder why the culture in which Job lived equated prosperity with blessing and hard times with cursing, why Job's wife could be so callous, why Elihu feels a personal responsibility to rip into Job, why Job listens to Elihu, why God speaks after his silence, why Job chooses not to answer God's request to answer, and why Job's confidence in God increases.

The No. 1 question? If God can prevent suffering yet permits it, is he truly good? In short, the answer is "yes." The secular worldview holds that seeking pleasure is the goal of this life, so suffering is bad for it is painful. Do anything to get pleasure! In contrast, the Christian worldview sees suffering as positive for through it we become more like Christ, the goal of his disciples. Our suffering is for our ultimate good. In 1 Peter 1:6-7 says, "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – or greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refines by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

Yes, I agree that suffering happens and is allowed by God for good purposes – to develop our patience, faith and hope, and to transform us so we are more Christlike. But I do not like pain. I try to avoid it. Getting absorbed in a great novel can do wonders to help me forget my troubles. . .for a while. I am compelled by my identity to believe God is good. Not only does the living Word attest to his goodness but also the work he has done in me proves his goodness.

What I've concluded from the book of Job is suffering happens to everyone, the godly and the ungodly. Suffering is a fact in our fallen world. Just because one lives a holy life

doesn't mean she can avoid suffering. In fact, suffering is probably more likely. Suffering doesn't often make sense. It is painful.

What we do with our suffering is pivotal. Throw a pity party? Or do we run to God? Do we try to see the good in suffering? Do we thank God in every circumstance, joyful or painful?

Some of the things to learn from Job:

- Reassure a hurting friend that her suffering is real and it hurts.
- Listen well, especially to the reason behind her pain. If her suffering is a result of her sin, gently help her come to this conclusion.
- Continually point her to God – that he will help her in her suffering and will use it for her good. :)