

God and Suffering: Four Sermons on the Book of Job

Week 1: Faith and the Problem of Pain

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Job 1:13-22 and Luke 23:13-24

One day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the eldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were feeding beside them, and the Sabeans fell on them and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them; I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three columns, made a raid on the camels and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another came and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house, and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you."

Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong-doing.

"Meanwhile, where is God? Go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double-bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is coming to believe such dreadful things about him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer.' Talk to me about the truth of religion, and I'll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion, and I'll listen submissively. But don't come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall expect that you don't understand."¹

This collection of sentences, and many others like them were first published in 1961 in a book by an author named N.W. Clerk. It attracted little attention and sold poorly, mainly because people at the time did not realize that N.W. Clerk was a pseudonym for the famous Christian author C.S. Lewis. This book, a collection of journal entries Lewis kept after the death of his wife from cancer, is now published under his real name, and is titled *A Grief Observed*.

The raw, naked emotion and honesty of Lewis' intimate reflections, written in the midst of great suffering and loss, are a bit shocking. To think that the author of *Mere Christianity*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *Miracles*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, among other defenses of the Christian faith, could feel so alienated from God is troublesome, much as it was for many

¹ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, in *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*, Harper-Collins, New York, 2002, p. 658, 666.

recently when it was revealed in the writings of Mother Teresa that she, too struggled in her faith. I think sometimes that we Christians can be accused of practicing faith by proxy, wherein we need there to be spiritual giants in our midst, people who appear to exhibit the kind of faith that the rest of us hope for, for people such as these can sometimes help the rest of us to believe.

Which can make the Book of Job so difficult to read and comprehend, even before we get past the first chapter, for Job is one of these spiritual giants. In fact, in the first verse of the book, we find Job described as “blameless,” “upright,” and “the greatest of all the people of the east.” In fact, Job is described as being so righteous that even God is depicted as bragging about Job, describing him as a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil, unlike anyone on earth. Job is described as being so righteous and God-fearing that he made burnt offerings before God for not only himself, but for each of his ten children, just in case one of them had sinned.

Now as we know, this bragging that God is doing about Job is being done to Satan, who argues that *of course* Job is blameless and upright. He is rich and has a large loving family, which are the *real* source of his righteousness. Take it all away, Satan argues, and Job will curse you to your face. It is important to note that ancient hearers would have understood Job’s enormous wealth to have been a sign of his righteousness. In the Book of Job, Satan sees this as an opportunity.

This leads us to the second problem in understanding the Book of Job: in this story, God takes Satan up on the bet, with the only condition being that Satan cannot kill Job. This is difficult for Christians to imagine. It is as if God is playing chess with human lives. It says a good deal more about ancient understandings of the sovereignty of God than we can explore today, but suffice it to say, the author of Job chose to contextualize Job’s suffering and loss as being something that God permitted rather than suggesting that Job’s suffering and loss (or anything else) were beyond the power and reach of the sovereign God of Israel.

The third problem in understanding the Book of Job comes from how the book ends, with Job regaining his fortune and ten more children. It is important to remember that children are irreplaceable, regardless of how much Job loved his second ten children, so while many of Job’s fortunes were blessed more abundantly than the first, not everything that was done was undone. The Bible, despite the presence of miracles in it, does not envision time travel or deny the permanence of death.

So Job loses everything, his oxen, his sheep, his camels, his children, and eventually his health (which happens in chapter two), and his reputation, and yet, he persists in his faith and he refuses to accuse God of any wrongdoing.

When suffering comes, we can blame God, or at least suggest, as C.S. Lewis did, that our suffering and any search for meaning within our suffering means that God has locked Godself behind closed doors, we can simply try to not think about it, or believe that God has forbidden questioning God’s will and will smite us further if we dare complain to God, we can turn from

God altogether, or we can look to Christ, who was and is God, and who suffered, and who, yes, questioned God in the process.

One Friday morning in the spring of the year in the year A.D. 33, the local Roman administrator of Judea was told that a man from out of town, a man from Nazareth, has been arrested for possibly plotting an insurrection against Rome. He has been betrayed by one in his inner circle, and had been arrested in a garden on the Mount of Olives, just outside of Jerusalem, the night prior.

None of this would have been surprising to Governor Pilate. He was well aware of the locals hatred of Roman occupation. He had seen messianic pretenders come and go, but still, he had been given strict instructions to maintain order, and he knew that this Passover season was a time each year when the threat of an uprising was greatest. Pilate was known for his brutal suppression of rebellion, once doing so in such a violent fashion that he was recalled to Rome to answer for it.

Which makes what happened that morning all the more surprising. As we see in our second reading this morning, Pilate was unable to find any guilt in this man from Nazareth named Jesus, and upon discovering that Jesus was a Galilean, sent him to Herod to be tried, yet Herod, a man as well known for brutality as Pilate could not find any guilt in Jesus either, so he sent him back to Pilate. Pilate told the crowd that had gathered Jesus was innocent three times, before deciding that he would not be able to change the mind of the mob, and only then did Pontius Pilate deliver Jesus of Nazareth, a man he knew to be innocent, to be crucified.

On Thursday night, the night before, Jesus had prayed that God call it all off, the arrest the crucifixion, the suffering, the death. On the cross, he would cry out to God “Why have you forsaken me?” In a way similar to C.S. Lewis’ complaint I shared at the outset of this message, Jesus does not cease to believe in God, however, for that moment, he sounds like a man who has somehow come to believe that our God is one who would lead you to the cross and then leave you there.

What are we to make of this then? What can we say about a God who allows (if not outwardly causes) suffering, yet who is at the same time the mighty God who becomes incarnate, to use C.S. Lewis’ words, “in a man of delicate sensibilities who wept at the grave of Lazarus and sweated blood at Gethsemane [who] faced all that the weakest of us face.” This is what we will explore in the next three sermons, but for now, let us hold fast to these truths: For all the imagery of our God as a mighty warrior, in Christ, we see him as a humble servant. For all of the ways in which we regard God as one who transcends human pain, we find in Christ God’s suffering servant. For all of our understandings of God as being holy, perfect, and righteous, we find in Christ God incarnate in the person of an innocent man dying on the cross.

I believe that if and when we regard God as being above the fray, afraid to side with anyone because God loves everyone, that we betray the biblical witness of God, and to understand God’s role in human pain and human suffering, we must consider the entire biblical

witness, and I believe that the biblical account bears witness to our God being a God who takes sides.

God sticks with Adam and Eve, even after their betrayal. God chooses two nonagenarians named Abraham and Sarah to become the parents of a nation. God makes a covenant with a militarily weak, wandering nation, who fails to live up to God's covenant again and again, yet God continues to side with them, again and again, calling the people into covenant faithfulness, only to have them turn away, yet like a determined lover God continues to pursue this underdog nation. God makes covenant, not with mighty Egypt, Assyria, or Midian, but with underdog Israel, and God honors that covenant, come what may.

And then, supremely in the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ, we see God willingly dwelling in the very midst of human pain, inhabiting a body that can feel human emotion and physical human pain. We see him born poor, feeling the nation in the midst of political oppression, being scorned by people who were not sure of the true nature of his parentage, facing scorn all his life, until he faced betrayal, mocking, torture, and death.

Yet in the midst of all of that pain, we find him always around those who suffer, serving the hungry, defending the oppressed, experiencing hunger and thirst and temptation himself, seeking out the sick and the blind, those who could not walk, those who were possessed by demons, and in him, we learn so much about God's priorities, and where our God chooses to be, and our God, the God who suffered our death, and rose from that death teaches us that if we want to find him, that we should do so in the midst of those who suffer, specifically, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, the naked, the stranger, and the prisoner, for Jesus chooses to be incarnate in those people, and in doing so, becomes incarnate in our pain and our need.

I wish I had the answer to why people suffer unfairly. Life may be easier if the world was arranged such that if you cheated on your taxes, you would get two flat tires at the same time the next time you were late for work. Yet, we know that is not how it works. Inasmuch as I would love to tell you that "early to bed and early to rise" were all it took to be "healthy, wealthy, and wise," we all know that life is not that simple, and sometimes faith means simply hanging on in the midst of things we cannot understand.

However, I do pray that we can find hope and comfort in this: our suffering, even suffering on the scale of what Job experienced, is something that we never face alone, that it is something that we face with the presence of an incarnate God who weeps, who heals, who gives strength, and who is often incarnate in those who stand with us, even in dark and difficult days, which is where we will pick up next Sunday.

Twenty-one years before he wrote *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Problem of Pain*, and I leave you this morning with words from it: When pain is to be borne, a little courage helps more than much knowledge, a little human sympathy more than much courage, and the least tincture of the love of God more than all.

May it be so for you today, and every day.

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.