

Perspective in the Middle of Suffering

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Date: 04 July 2021

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[0 : 00] Thank you very much, Ellen. Well, good morning, everyone. As has been mentioned already, my name is Alistair and it is my privilege to be the assistant pastor here at Brunsfield. And this morning it is my joy to open up Job chapter two together with you all.

So please do have that passage open in front of you. We're going to be diving in and out. But before we do that, let us turn to our God in prayer. Let's pray. Father, when we come to a passage like this, we have so many questions.

We have so much experience of suffering in our individual lives. And Lord, we ask this morning that we would submit to your word. And Lord, we echo that song that we have just listened to or sung at home.

Lord, we need you. This very hour, we need you. And Father, we pray that the words of my mouth and that the meditations of all of our hearts would be pleasing to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. In 1967, Johnny Erickson Tada was an athletic 17 year old girl.

[1 : 14] And one day she went out swimming with her sister in a bay and she dove off a raft into shallow water, hitting her head. From that moment on, Johnny has been confined to a wheelchair and doesn't have the use of her body from the neck down.

She says that as she heard that news about her paralysis in her mind, she cried out to God and she said, God, I can't, I won't live like this.

But knowing that she couldn't physically take her own life, she decided to ruin her life emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

Telling her family to cut her off, basically, to leave her in a dark room day and night and to never come in and see her. She wanted to lie in darkness.

Her physical suffering had brought her to the end of herself. And it was in one of those dark rooms that she cried, God, if you won't let me die, show me how to live.

[2 : 28] And then Christian friends gathered around her and opened the Bible with her. And she says that over time she learnt a wonderful truth. That sometimes God allows what he hates to happen, like suffering and paralysis.

To bring forth Christ in her life, the hope of glory. Joanie now is a regular speaker about the reality of suffering and the comfort that the gospel can bring to those in pain.

The hope that people can have as they know that even our suffering is not outwith the control of a good God. She says that her suffering, or she sees her suffering, in the perspective of eternity.

And that's what we're going to be thinking about this morning. Perspective in suffering. So last week we looked at the absolutely devastating suffering that Job went through.

As a test to prove the genuineness of his faith. Now I'd encourage you, if you haven't listened to that sermon, please go and do that. And follow with us through the entire series on the book of Job.

[3 : 50] In Job chapter 1, Job lost all of his worldly possessions. All ten of his children died. All of his servants were killed.

And yet even after all of that, the chapter ends with that wonderful declaration. The Lord gives. And the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

And we must acknowledge that the suffering Job goes through is very extreme. It's not the kind of suffering that many of us or any of us will go through.

I can't imagine a time when any of us will lose our entire families. In fact, I pray that that tragedy never happens to any of us. But I think probably even more unimaginable than Job's suffering is the perspective he has in the middle of that overwhelming suffering.

Job's perspective is to praise God in the pain that is his every single day. And Job doesn't come to that perspective overnight.

[5 : 04] That perspective is birthed out of years of contemplating who God is. And experiencing his gifts and his character. Job's perspective comes from a deep conviction of who God is.

And I can say that as I've sat with many Christians over the years, I have seen this perspective in the flesh. In older saints. Who've experienced the Lord in marvelous ways.

Both in times of joy and happiness. And in times of agony. And turmoil. Suffering for the average Christian today could mean the death of a loved one.

Maybe you lose a parent. Or a sibling. Maybe in some tragedy a child is taken away from you after a short life.

Or maybe the child doesn't even survive the full length of the pregnancy. Or maybe you lose a job and suddenly, you've been in that job for years and suddenly that financial stability is taken away.

[6 : 17] That assurance of a monthly paycheck is ripped away and you're at a loss. Maybe you go to the doctors. And you're diagnosed with cancer.

Maybe you're told you have an incurable illness. Or maybe you're told you only have a few months to live. Maybe your suffering isn't physical but it is mental.

And your day and night is plagued with anxiety that cripples you. Maybe it's the shadows of depression that plague your life.

Or maybe you're still feeling the effects of childhood trauma. That plague every single day and you never seem to get any relief.

Everything seems lost. Now none of that is the extent of suffering that Job's goes through. But it is suffering. And it is hard.

[7 : 18] We shouldn't look at Job and think that we need to suck it up because he suffered far worse than we ever will. But what we do need to do is look at Job's perspective and try to learn from it.

And we need to learn from Job's grief. See I think our British nature means that many of us have a stiff upper lip approach to suffering.

We put on a face and we say everything will be fine and we just power through. But in reality we all know that that is a superficial mask that covers something far less glamorous.

The reality is that when we suffer we will cry. We will grieve. We will mourn. And we will feel pain. And you know what? That is okay.

We need to learn to grieve like Job. There is nothing wrong with crying and showing emotion.

[8 : 26] We need to take off our masks and get vulnerable with each other. To create a safe space to suffer well for the glory of God. And Job will help us this morning see a healthy way to grieve.

As well as a good perspective in suffering. So if last week in Job chapter 1 all the suffering or suffering was all about things external to Job.

This morning in Job 2 it is all about physical suffering. We are going to look at verses 1 to 8 which are about suffering that breaches the skin.

And then verses 9 to 13 which are all about three perspectives. Three responses to suffering in the ashes. So the first thing we see in this passage is suffering that breaches the skin.

In verses 1 to 8. Suffering that breaches the skin. Now chapter 2 begins in an almost identical way as Job chapter 1 does.

[9 : 29] Satan shows up to this heavenly courtroom with God on his throne. And God is receiving reports from the supernatural beings through whom he is in absolute control of the goings on in the world.

But there are two differences here. The first is in verse 1 where it says this. Read with me. Satan also came with them to present himself before him and that is before God.

So this time it is explicit. The Satan, the accuser is there on purpose. He is invited as another created being through whom God governs the world.

Satan is under the control of God. And he can only work within the parameters that God allows him to. Last week God allowed Satan to touch Job's possessions.

Things external to himself that were very near and dear to him. We don't want to minimize that. And all of it was taken away. God let that happen in order to test the genuineness of Job's faith.

[10 : 43] The second difference between chapters 1 and 2 is in verse 3. Where it says this. Then the Lord said to Satan, Have you considered my servant Job?

There is no one on earth like him. He is blameless and upright. A man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity.

Though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason. There is repetition here. But there is also a bit of a difference.

The repetition where God highlights Job as an example of godliness. An example of faith. Is there to highlight the futility of Satan's attempts to derail Job.

But the difference is that God says it was all for nothing. It's as if God is saying, Satan, you did your worst.

[11 : 43] You broke this man's whole life. You took everything he had because I let you. And still his faith stands. At the end of chapter 1, you can imagine Satan sitting in the background rubbing his hands in glee.

Thinking that Job will be destroyed. And that he will come to the end of himself. Satan wants Job dead and gone because of the genuineness of his faith.

Satan is the accuser. The enemy who comes to steal, kill and destroy. He is the accuser whose desire is to minimize the glory of God.

And he wants to make that happen by destroying Job. Who is an example of glorifying God in the midst of suffering.

But in verse 3, God says triumphantly, Satan, your efforts were all for nothing. Job's faith stands strong. But Satan, as the accuser, is at it again in verse 4.

[12 : 54] Do you see? Skin for skin, he replied. A man will give all he has for his own life, but now stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face.

Satan is saying that everything that has happened to Job is suffering related to things that are external to him.

But if Job's body is attacked, then he will curse God. The only thing left is Job's body. Satan is covering all the bases in an attempt to bring Job to the point where he wants to die.

Satan wants to rob God of any glory that he will get from Job's suffering well. When your health goes, when your body fails, when you are physically suffering, when your physical being, who we are, is attacked, we are vulnerable.

Physical suffering is so hard because you might get to the point where you want to tear your body apart. The pain can be so overwhelming that you're consumed day and night with it, and you can't even remember what it's like to be pain-free anymore.

[14 : 17] Now maybe you're sitting there thinking, well, what is this 29-year-old? What does he know about physical suffering? Well, eight years ago, my journey of physical suffering began.

Which is why I said last week that I have lived in the book of Job. For the last eight years, I've been suffering from a chronic illness that means I suffer constant, agonizing pain, 24-7, 365 days a year. There is no pain relief, and there is nothing the doctors can do to help me. There is no cure. So, suffering is not a stranger to me, but it is not a friend.

It is a constant and familiar companion. And I say from experience, how we respond in those moments of pain and suffering is important because we can either make it push us towards God to live for Him in the midst of that pain, or we can make it push us away from God and hate Him.

So, let's see how Job responds to his physical suffering. Verse 6. God gives Satan permission to afflict Job's body, but he must spare Job's life.

[15 : 45] Satan wants to destroy Job, but God wants to prove the genuineness of his faith through the test of suffering. So, friends, Satan is still bound under the sovereign rule of God and unable to go beyond what God allows.

And so, verse 7. Satan went out from the presence of the Lord. You see that immediately? It's that kind of language. And afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown on his head.

Job's body is covered from head to toe with painful, pus-filled oozing sores. His skin is discolored, disfigured, and peeling off.

Now sit with him for a second. Imagine how he feels with this absolute, total, intimate suffering. With no respite.

No medicine. No cure. And to Job's knowledge, no reason. Imagine that burning sensation that he must be consuming him.

[17 : 00] The pain of not being able to sit without touching a sore that will erupt. The pain of day and night not resting or sleeping because of the pain he's in.

The Lord's faithful servant suffers. Once a rich man loved by many, now poor, isolated and alone.

In verse 8, Job took a piece of pottery, broken pottery, and scraped himself as he sat among the ashes. So Job leaves the town and he goes to the dump.

He goes to the place outside the city where all the rubbish would be burned and he sits in the ashes and he mourns. He goes into isolation, all alone, abandoned, cut off from his friends, all but his wife, dead, scarred with sores that plague him day and night and he has no idea why.

It's so bad that Job even takes a piece of pottery to take the pus out of these sores to at least get a little bit of relief if possible.

[18:21] It's important to say here that he is not self-harming, but he's trying to ease the pain a little bit. So Job is in isolated mourning and friends, we need to sit with him in that pain and realize the devastation that he is going through.

And we need to learn something here about mourning. We need to know that there is absolutely nothing wrong with sitting on the ashes and weeping the suffering that you're going through.

I know that for some of you, this week has been agony. It's been a nightmare. Things have happened that have kept you up at night.

Doctors appointments have left you with decisions that you never wanted to make. It's been a week of despair. Or maybe it wasn't this week, but it is a long-term illness.

Or maybe you're continuing to feel the effects of some trauma from your past friends. It is okay to mourn. In fact, in the Bible, it is expected that when suffering comes your way, you take a seat with Job in the ashes and you weep.

[19:48] In the UK, we hide behind a stiff upper lip. We don't like to think of pain in our lives or our bodies because it's hard. And we don't like to show emotions.

But that is suppressing the very emotions that God has gifted us with in order to help us in the midst of our suffering. It is okay to grieve.

It's okay to cry. It's okay to mourn. And it is okay to ask why. The book of Psalms is full of that kind of lament and grief.

So we can go to God with our hard questions and our physical pain and cry out to Him. Psalm 13 says, How long, O Lord?

Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? Psalm 10. Why, O Lord, do you stand far away?

[20:51] Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? And in Psalm 88, the psalmist describes darkness as his closest friend.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, in our pain, in our suffering, we can and we should grieve and mourn. When suffering breaches the skin, Job sits on the ash heap and he mourns.

And as he sits on those ashes, mourning his loss, mourning his suffering, in verses 9 to 13, we see three different responses to suffering in the ashes.

Three different responses to suffering in the ashes. Now there's one bad response and two good responses here. And I hope that seeing these responses will help us as we suffer, but also as we help and care for those others who suffer.

So the first response is the bad one in verse 9 and it is the response of a suffering spouse. Read verse 9 with me. His wife said to him, are you still maintaining your integrity?

[22:10] Just curse God and die. I'll take a step back from this for a second. We cannot be too harsh on Job's wife because all of the suffering that Job went through in chapter 1, the exact same has happened to her.

And now in addition to all of that, losing her possessions, losing all 10 of her children, she's looking at her husband who is a shadow of a man he used to be.

So we can't be too harsh on her. And we actually don't know her intentions behind what she says. It could be that she thinks her husband is dying and out of love for him, she doesn't want him to suffer anymore.

And so she says, just curse God and suffer some form of divine judgment and so it will all be over. It could be that she thinks Job is suffering because of some sin in his life and she thinks that he's under the judgment of God.

And so she says, just curse God and die. Get it over and done with. Or it could be that she is angry. Angry at the amount of pain and suffering that is afflicting her husband.

[23:38] And in her anger, she says, why are you holding on to a God who seems to have forgotten you? Regardless of what's going on in her mind, her conclusion is the same.

She is telling her husband to give up on God. And do you see how that is not a good or a right response when we face suffering?

Job and his wife have not seen the heavenly courtroom which has brought about all this suffering.

They aren't aware that all of this is a test to prove the genuineness of Job's faith.

And Job's wife doesn't see that all of this suffering is under the control of a sovereign good God who promises to preserve Job's life.

Job's wife is acting a bit like a second Eve. Tempting her husband to sin. Tempting him to curse the very one who has given them both breath.

[24 : 45] To curse the one who has blessed them abundantly in their lives. She's tempting her husband to fall into Satan's hand and do exactly what Satan wants Job to do.

Now regardless of her intentions she is acting as a mouthpiece for Satan. Job's wife is tempting him to go against the God he loves and the God that loves him.

And this is especially hard because family are supposed to stick by you in your moments of suffering. I could not go one day without the support that Sabina and my family give me.

Many of you have been that pillar of support for others. For a spouse for a parent for a partner for a friend it is challenging to see a loved one suffer isn't it?

Because that in and of itself is suffering. Seeing a loved one suffer but it's hard because you're supporting them at the same time. Job's wife doesn't see the whole picture and friends we often won't see the big picture of what's going on.

[26 : 08] We probably won't know the reasons behind our suffering but remember that Job is here to teach us how to suffer well for the glory of God.

In our suffering we should not curse God but we should make our suffering push us into his loving arms with all of our questions with all of our tears and with that same resilience and faith that Job has that enables him to say even in the darkest valley of despair that the Lord gives and the Lord takes away.

Blessed be the name of the Lord. We're supposed to look at Job's wife and learn not to do what she does. If you're a spouse a parent or whatever you also have a role of glorifying God as you see someone else suffering and you help them in that.

It's hard to see a loved one suffer but as the caregiver and supporter you must maintain your faith and encourage them in their suffering to do the same.

Whether we're the one suffering or we're supporting the sufferer we all have a role to glorify God in it. Cursing God should never be an option for us because we don't know what's going on.

[27 : 44] God never gives up on his people so why should we give up on him? God never can't so this is the first response the bad response of a suffering spouse.

And then in verse 10 we get our second response and it's a good one. It's the response of a faithful suffering servant. Read verse 10 with me. This is Job responding to his wife and he says you are talking like a foolish woman.

Shall we accept good from God and not trouble? And in all of this Job did not sin in what he said. Now Job is not calling his wife stupid.

We need to be clear on that. And we need to remember that this is part of wisdom literature. And in wisdom literature the wise person is one who is faithful and lives according to God's word and the foolish person who is the person who is not faithful to the Lord and who lives in religious ignorance. An example of this is Psalm 14 verse 1 where it says the fool says in his heart there is no God. So Job isn't talking about his wife's intellect but about her encouragement for Job to abandon his faith in God.

[29 : 02] And then we get another amazing statement from a man who is literally sitting in ash in the midst of suffering. He says shall we accept good from God and not trouble?

Job's heart and mind are fixed on God. Job recognizes that all the good he has received in life is from God and so he trusts that this same God who is trustworthy and knows best even when harmful things come his way.

Job knows that God doesn't owe him anything. God isn't a blessing dispenser who messes up when things go wrong. Job doesn't understand why he is suffering and he never finds out the reason behind it but he finds comfort in the character of the Lord who is afflicting him.

Now that is not an easy place to get to when you're suffering but it is a place that we should all be striving towards.

Horatio Spafford was a man who sent his wife and four children on a boat from the States to England in 1873 and on route the boat collided with another ship and 200 people on board drowned including all of Horatio's children.

[30 : 33] When his wife got to England she sent a telegram which read saved alone. And Horatio jumped on the next boat to England and it stopped where the tragic accident took place.

And in that moment Spafford penned these wonderful words. When peace like a river attendeth my way when sorrows like sea billows roll whatever my lot thou hast taught me to say it is well it is well with my soul.

Friends we cannot only accept good gifts from God and even when suffering does come our way we must rely on God's good character on God's faithfulness on his holiness and trust that he can use even the most horrific situations for his glory because his glory is far more important than our comfort and than our health.

Charles Spurgeon a London minister from years ago who suffered depression for a long time and who went through a tremendous amount of suffering in his life puts it like this I have learned to kiss the waves that throw me up against the rock of ages.

Brothers and sisters when you suffer let it be a wave that throws you against the Lord. Let it push you to God because there is no better place for you to rest.

[32 : 34] There is no better place for you to cry. there is no better place for you to suffer pain than in the hands of a good God who can work all things for your good even when it doesn't feel like it.

So that's the response of a faithful suffering servant resilient faith even in the face of devastating suffering. And the final response and the second good one is comforting silence.

In verses 11 to 13. Job's three friends hear about the devastation that has come upon him and in verse 11 says they make an appointment to go together to sympathize with him and comfort Job in his suffering.

Now at this point Job has been sitting on the ash pile for a few months. He says that in Job chapter 7 verse 3. So Job has been isolated in agony sitting in pain and suffering for months when they show up.

And when they arrive they see him from a distance and they can't recognize him. His appearance is so marred by the tragedies that he isn't recognizable.

[34 : 00] His suffering has taken such a toll on him that he is not the same man they once knew. his appearance is so changed that when they see him verse 12 says this they began to weep aloud and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads.

They're responding as if Job has died because of the suffering he's in. They look at their friends sitting in the ashes and they cannot help but weep with him and mourn.

But do you notice they don't do it from a distance? Verse 13 Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights.

No one said a word to him because they saw how great his suffering was. Today this is what Christian community should look like.

Romans 15 gives us the example of the church being a place where you rejoice with those who rejoice and will you mourn with those who mourn? Like the friends mourn when they see Job as a church we share in each other's sufferings because it is hard to see another member of our local body in pain.

[35 : 24] This is what the local church should look like. Brothers and sisters sitting alongside each other in the ashes and crying. When someone goes through that amount of suffering sure dropping them a text would be nice.

Giving them a call might be a little bit of help for a while. Dropping around a meal is good and a practical thing to do but what will really help someone in their suffering is having a church family and friends who will drop everything and run to the person in need and sit with them out of a genuine love for them and be silent.

Because a person who is suffering most they need the presence of faithful friends. Words won't help at first. Out of context Bible verses will not help but getting on your hands and knees and sitting in the dirt and in the ashes with a brother or sister in Christ and weeping with them.

That is true comfort that goes beyond words. Being present with those who suffer is far more precious than any worldly wisdom. Sitting silently with someone who suffers is a powerful witness of your love for them.

Now Job's friends mess up as the book develops but I think they get it 100% right here. They sit with Job. They don't pretend to know what's happening. They don't try to justify the suffering but they are just silent.

[37 : 05] Friends this is what it looks like to have perspective in suffering. To know that even in the midst of our darkest valleys the Lord is good and trustworthy.

Job was a righteous man who suffered not for any sin that he had committed but he is a foreshadow of the righteous man who suffered not for any sin that he committed but Jesus Christ who suffered for your sin and for mine.

Job's appearance was so marred by the pain and agony that he went through in absolute isolation. Jesus was beaten, mocked, whipped, his flesh was torn, a crown of thorns was pushed on his head and Isaiah says that his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond any human likeness and he was nailed to a cruel cross where he would die alone as his followers ran away in fear.

Friends it is that man, the truly righteous one, the perfect suffering servant who went through agony and isolation so that his people, so that the Lord's people could be saved from the ultimate eternal suffering of eternal life in hell under the judgment in God because they have cursed God in their hearts.

Job's suffering teaches us how to suffer well for the glory of God. Jesus' suffering is the moment that God himself took on immense suffering in our place and it is Jesus, the perfect suffering servant who draws near in those times of personal suffering and he says I know I'm here.

[39 : 18] Finish the race well and live for those words that will give you life. Well done good and faithful servant. That's the perspective we need in our suffering.

Joni Erickson has been bound to a wheelchair for over 50 years. She travels the world encouraging people in the midst of their suffering not by giving them half baked truths or theological sound bites but she sits with them.

She listens and she tells people of the great God who even in the midst of turmoil can bring hope beyond words.

Joni has learned that sometimes God allows what he hates to happen to bring forth in us Christ the hope of glory. Job got through his suffering because he knew who God was and friends that's how you get through suffering today.

That's the perspective you need to see our suffering in light of eternity and in light of the good God that we serve who sent his son so that we could be spared the ultimate suffering of separation from God.

[40 : 41] Let's pray together. Amen. Amen. Amen. Father I don't know everyone in this room or everyone watching this and what is going on in their lives.

I don't know the suffering they are going through but you do. Father would you give them the perspective that they need to not turn their back on you but would you help them run to you in their pain and cling to you for their dear lives.

Father would you help us all as we help those who suffer not be the voice of temptation that says curse God but be the voice of encouragement that points people to Christ to the hope of eternity with you and to the wonderful promise of the Lord's presence in our everyday.

Help us suffer well for your glory. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.