

There's nothing more certain than suffering. If it's not us, it's someone that we care about. Disease, death, disaster, disappointment. Tim Keller refers to these as the "Deadly D's." When we suffer it's natural to ask the question, "why?" It's the first word out of our mouths when tragedy hits. Why? Why?

There is no book of the Bible and there's really no other literature ever written that addresses the great question of suffering (the "why" question of suffering) with the depth and wisdom and honesty of the book of Job. The book of Job is actually an epic poem- a lyrical epic poem, the only one like it in all of Scripture. We're going to spend this week and next week learning from this book.

Right at the beginning of Job we receive some crucial advice about how to suffer the pains that occur in this life. It has to do with this question, "Why?" Here's the advice we get from the text. We're going to learn to avoid simplistic answers to the question of suffering.

There is no easy answer that explains why we suffer. When we experience pain, there are two ways that we typically respond. The person of faith often reacts by questioning what they did to cause God to get upset with them. "Why is He punishing me?" "What did I do wrong?" "Did I not do enough?" "Did I not pray enough?" "I didn't go to church for a couple of weeks, could that be the reason?"

There are many people of faith (religious people) who say, "If you're sick, it's because you don't have enough faith." "If you're having financial problems, you need to believe- you need more faith."

This response to suffering comes from a place that we'll call Moralism. If we start doing the right things and pulling the rights levers, maybe God will bless us. If we just work harder and pray more, He has to respond.

The other response to suffering does not come from a place of faith, instead it's a response of Cynicism. People of faith often see pain and suffering as a punishment. Secular people tend to see suffering as just the randomness of life. "Life is a roll of the dice and sometime's they come up snake eyes." Cynicism is based on the belief that nobody is in charge. Life is just random chance.

People of faith (religious people) have this expectation that if you live a good life then good things will happen to you. So, if bad things are happening, maybe you're not living "good" enough. Secular people view the world differently. When they see suffering they say, "See this proves there is no God, or if there is a God, He's incompetent." In the mind of the cynic, suffering proves there is no loving Creator in charge of everything.

Those are the two primary responses to pain and suffering: Moralism and Cynicism. The book of Job comes out of the gate and declares that both of those approaches are wrong. They are spiritual dead ends. Consider the amazing dialogue that we read between God and Satan. In verse 8 of chapter 1, "*The Lord asked Satan, 'Have you noticed my servant Job? He is the finest man in all the earth. He is blameless—a man of complete integrity. He fears God and stays away from evil.'*" And Satan says, "Oh you think he's so special- hurt him! Let bad things happen to him and you'll see he's no good." And God says, "*All right, you may test him,*" *the Lord said to Satan. 'Do whatever you want with everything he possesses, but don't harm him physically.'*" So Satan goes out and does all these terrible things to Job.

When you look at this for the first time you might be horrified. "What is going on?! God and Satan are negotiating over a man's life?" That reaction is understandable, I suppose, but it misses the genius of this text. This is a narrative- a story- that dramatically gets across the point of God's relationship with our suffering. No other philosophy and no other religion holds this view of God's relationship with suffering. What do I mean?

On the one hand, please notice, it's Satan's idea that all these terrible things should happen to Job. God

doesn't come up with the idea. Satan comes up with it and Satan goes out and makes it happen. God does not actually, actively, directly cause the suffering. This is a way of getting across a very important point. When God created the world He didn't make disease in it- there weren't natural disasters- that's not the world God made. It wasn't a world where windstorms blew houses over and killed everyone inside. It wasn't a place of death. Disease and disaster and death are not things God actually made- they're in this world- but He did not directly make them. They are forces of darkness that were unleashed when we turned away from God. When we rebelled against God the fabric of this world began to unravel.

We unleashed these forces. So on the one hand we see God is not actively desiring- deliberately, intentionally creating- the suffering that goes on in Job's life BUT, HOWEVER (and this is very important) He is still in complete control. This story is not a picture of God and Satan as two equal and opposite forces. No, this is God in complete control, but what He's doing is overruling the evil. Do you understand this? God permits it, (notice He says, "All right.") but then He limits what can be done. "You can do this, but you can't do that. You can't touch him."

Why does God allow this? Here's the answer, God only allows Satan to accomplish the very opposite of what he wanted to accomplish. He only gives Satan enough rope to hang himself. Satan is bringing evil into Job's life, right? He brings Job suffering, but what are the actual results he's after? Do you remember? Satan wants to discredit Job. That's what he wants. Satan wants Job to be exposed as a fraud.

You don't even need to read the whole book to know something about Job. He is one of the most famous people who has ever lived- one of the greatest that has ever lived. Thousands of years later and people are still studying his life. Countless lives have been changed and shaped because of his bravery and courage and faith in the midst of terrible tragedy. Satan was allowed by God to bring evil into Job's life. God hates evil. He opposes it. He did not create a world in which it would exist. But He permits it. Why? He allows Satan only to bring evil into Job's life in such a way that it completely defeats Satan's intended results. God only allows Satan to defeat himself.

What this is telling us is two things (these are truly important). We're being told that this is probably the way God works with us. God hates suffering and pain, but on the other hand He's in control. You can't say that He can't help it. Sure, He's permitting it. He's in charge. But you can't say that He loves to see people suffer. He doesn't! He hates it, but He permits it. Why does He permit it? He allows suffering and sorrow to come into our lives only to the degree that it defeats our Adversary's actual intentions for us.

It's the same principle that we learned in the life of Joseph back in Genesis 50. Do you remember? Joseph's brothers had sold him into slavery, only to learn years later that he has risen to the highest place of leadership in the land of Egypt. When his brothers realize that Joseph holds their lives in his hands they're terrified, right? But Joseph doesn't have them killed or placed in prison. He doesn't force them into slave labor. Instead he tells them, "*You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people.*" Our enemy uses suffering and pain to harm us, and God permits it- He does- but only to turn it for our good- only to the degree that it defeats the intended results of our enemy.

That's the first thing we learn in these verses, but the other thing we learn is that Job never finds out about this. Did you know that? Through the entire book, Job never hears about any of this. He never learns why he has had to suffer. In fact, when you get to the end of the book and God speaks to Job (we're going to spend most of our time there next week), He never brings any of this up. God never tells Job about it. He never says, "Now listen Job, I know that you've really had a rough go of it lately. But I

just want to explain. Do you realize that for the rest of time- for the rest of history- your life will be the model for how to go through suffering? Your example, how you've weathered all of this, is going to inspire people who go through similar circumstances for generations to come. So you see, it's all going to be worth it, Job." God never says that. All God says is, "Who darkens counsel with words without knowledge?"

The Moralist says, "The reason you're suffering is because you're not living correctly. You need more faith." And the Cynic says, "The reason you're suffering is life is random chance and God's out to lunch." Those answers are too simplistic. They offer nothing to the person who is in pain.

But Scripture says both of those positions are too simplistic. They are spiritual dead ends. What the Word of God calls us to do is to serve God- to trust Him- even though we will never know the reason behind our suffering, just like Job never knew the actual reason. Faith is staying in relationship with a God that we cannot control. (It's like the song- Our God cannot be tamed. He's not safe. He's dangerous. But He is good.) We need to avoid simplistic answers to the question of suffering.

There is a second lesson that we can learn from this text. Don't just resign yourself to the fact that you'll never know why- embrace it. Embrace the fact that you don't need to know. You might say, "Why would I ever do that?!" Here's why.

In verse 8, God declares, *"Have you noticed my servant Job? He is the finest man in all the earth. He is blameless—a man of complete integrity. He fears God and stays away from evil."* He says, "Job is my servant and he fears me." But the Hebrew word for fear is a much more positive term than how it comes across in English. The word fear means, "Inward awe and wonder." So God is saying, "Job serves me out of love." "Job loves me." That's what God is declaring, and Satan says, "No he doesn't." *"Reach out and take away everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face!"* "It's the things that he loves- the money, the status, and the prosperity. Job doesn't love you, he loves what he gets from you."

Now let's give the devil his due. I believe he's put his finger smack onto one of the big problems with the human race. There is no place more like this than the U.S.A. This is how we operate. So often we don't love others for who they are, but for what we can get from them. In fact we're often completely skeptical and guarded when other people when they treat us well for this very reason. "They must want something from me. They must have an ulterior motive." When we behave this way we become as cynical as Satan.

If you want to be a compassionate person- a person of integrity- you've got to learn how to love God for who He is, Himself, alone and love people the same way. The only way that's going to happen, almost always- the only way that we will ever learn to love God for who He is, Himself- is through suffering. Listen, the only way to be sure you're serving God for who He is, alone, you've got to be in a condition where you get nothing else out of the deal. In fact you're getting the opposite. Because you are serving God, bad things are happening to you. That's the reason you can't have an explanation for your suffering, or you will never become the kind of person suffering can make of you.

If you really want to learn how to love God for Himself alone, to become not a manipulator or an exploiter- someone Satan says you are even though it's only partly true- then you've got to be willing to endure difficulty and pain and hardship. The apostle Paul put it this way in Romans 5:3-5, *"We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us."*

There isn't a simple answer to the question of why we suffer, but we need to actively embrace life without knowing the reason for suffering. That's the only way we're going to become a person who

loves God unconditionally.

Satan is cynical about love. When God points out Job, "Have you seen my servant Job? He loves me." It's as though Satan replies, "What's love got to do with it?"

Satan is a cynic. He hurls accusations at us, "You people don't really love each other. You're just using each other." And God says, "I can create people who love me freely and without conditions." The only way to be someone who loves God freely and unconditionally is to have it be true even when you suffer.

How do we do this? Job starts off pretty well. He says, *"I came naked from my mother's womb, and I will be naked when I leave. The Lord gave me what I had, and the Lord has taken it away. Praise the name of the Lord!"*

Even in Job's emotional pain- even in this display of anguish- Job holds on to God's grace. What does he say? Does he say, "God, these things you've taken from me- they were mine! I earned them! These homes, these children, this money- these things were mine! How dare you take them away?" Is that the response of Job? No. He says, "I came naked." Naked means: vulnerable and helpless. "And I'm leaving naked." Everything Job had was on loan from God and he knew it. They were gifts from God, not entitlements.

Here's why it's critical to hold on to God's grace when you're going through suffering. If you build your life on your things; if you say, "the thing that makes me who I am is my kids, or my status, or my stuff, or my capabilities," when you suffer it will pull you away from those things. Suffering will pull you away from the source of your happiness. That's what suffering is- it's enduring the loss of something or someone important to you. If you build your life on that stuff, suffering will bring you only sadness, anger, and misery. But if, like Job, you choose to build your life on God's grace, (and you certainly like having resources and kids and friends- but if you're ultimate love is God's love), then suffering will drive you deeper into the source of your joy.

If you build your life on things, suffering will pull you away from the source of your joy, but if you choose to make God the ultimate satisfaction of your life, then suffering will only draw you closer to Him. That's the reason Job is known for all time. It's the reason Satan, ultimately is defeated. So go home and be like Job! Listen we're going to see next week that Job couldn't even be like Job in the rest of the book.

When Job got a hold of grace he didn't have a lot to go on. All he knew was that God had blessed him and he view those blessings as a loan. If God wants to take them, they were His to begin with so he has the right to do that. That's rational and it's correct, but he didn't have the resource to understand grace like we do.

Let me tell you about it. Satan comes to God and says, "Job doesn't really love you, he's just using you." It's not the first time he's done this. Do you remember when he did it before? He also did it back in the garden. In Eden, Satan came to us and said, "God doesn't really love you." Adam and Eve said to the serpent, "We're not allowed to eat of the tree because God said so, and He loves us." What did Satan say? "You must be kidding?! What's love got to do with it? He's using you. He's trying to exploit you. That tree is perfectly good to eat."

When Satan said bad things to God about us, even though there was some truth in them, God didn't accept it. But when Satan said bad things to us about God, and there was no truth in it, we believed it. The lie of Satan is, if you give yourself to God completely and unconditionally, He'll crush you. You can't be happy that way. You can't trust God. God doesn't really love you. That's the lie of Satan and

throughout history we've believed it.

Do you know the reason why when suffering comes we immediately think the worst of God? Do you know why? Let me speak for myself. My main problem in this life is that I don't really believe that God loves me. It's not because I'm a hypocrite. I teach that God loves us every week, and I believe it, up here- but in my heart of hearts I am not always certain that the God of the universe loves me unconditionally and without fail. Deep down, when someone criticizes me or when bad things happen, my confidence erodes and I am unsettled. Why? What I know about God's love is abstract, but what I experience in this life is harder to dismiss.

When I suffer, just like you, I'm tempted to believe the lie of Satan that God doesn't love me. Do you know the biggest thing we need in this life? We need proof that God loves us. The thing that we need to handle life is proof that He loves us. The thing we need to walk the path of suffering, without knowing the reasons why but expecting that He is turning us into people of greatness- the thing we need is proof that Satan's a liar and God really does love us.

How will we ever know this for sure? I'll tell you how. I don't know how Job knew about God's grace but I can tell you how I know. Centuries later, Satan brought pain and tragedy into the life of another innocent sufferer who died naked, crying out to God "why have you abandoned me?" and he received no answer. It was Jesus.

Keep this in mind. When Job suffered he was only relatively innocent. Jesus was absolutely innocent. When Job felt that God had abandoned him, He hadn't really. We'll see that next week. But Jesus was truly abandoned by God. In fact Jesus was the only person in history that God said, "If you obey me fully I'll turn my back on you and you'll experience complete separation from the face of the Father." "If you obey me fully, I will cast you away." God never said that to anyone, except His own son, Jesus. Jesus is the only person to ever serve God, truly, for nothing. Why did he do it? For us!

That's your proof, you Jobs out there. You who are suffering and you have no idea why and from what you can tell it's not because of anything you've done. That's what you need, you Jobs out there, to see the ultimate Job, Jesus Christ, the innocent sufferer. When He died on the cross for you it proved for all time that Satan is a liar. God, in human form, was willing to love us for who we are, ourselves. He didn't get anything out of it. Jesus already had all glory and power and honor. Why did He love us, because He was going to get something out of it? No. He loved us for who we are, so you go out and love Him for who He is!

Jesus suffered, not so we wouldn't suffer, but so when we suffer we can become like Him.