

# “When God Is The Problem”

a sermon by

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**Text: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:5-6).**

Recently I came upon a book by Bart D. Ehrman entitled *God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*. The author of this book, a university professor, has certainly put his finger on one of the most troubling questions that Christians have to deal with, the question of how we equate a sovereign and loving God to the reality of suffering in the world.

C. S. Lewis once stated the problem in this fashion: “If God is great, he is not good; if he is good, he is not great.” It is an academic question, to be sure. But it is personal as well. There are times when each one of us faces this question. There are times when the level of suffering appears so great that there can be no correlation between what we witness as suffering and any sense of purpose or retribution for evil. Gardiner Taylor, a well known African-American preacher, once said, “If God be for us, who can be against us. But if God be against us, then what difference does it make who is for us?”

## I.

There are many passages in the Bible that raise the issue of God and human suffering, but there is certainly no Book of the Bible that deals with it in quite the breadth that is found in the Book of Job.

The Book of Job is the story of a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job (Job 1-2). He was a blameless and upright man who feared God and turned away from evil. But unknown to Job, he becomes a pawn on the chessboard in a cosmic struggle between God and Satan. God commends to Satan God’s servant Job. But Satan challenges God. He argues that Job worships God because he has been blessed by God. Satan challenges God to put Job to the test, to inflict pain upon him to see if Job will remain faithful.

So calamity comes to Job. His children are killed. His livestock are slaughtered. His wealth is all removed from him. But still Job does not curse God. Then, finally, Job is inflicted with loathsome sores that cover his entire body. At the end of the prologue, we find Job sitting on an ash heap outside the city gates. His friend Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite come to comfort him.

They reflect the conventional wisdom of their day. Job is suffering, they argue, because he has sinned against God. Job argues that he is innocent. This argument is finally broken when God speaks to Job in the whirlwind (Job 40), confronting him with the question by what right Job has to question the almighty. In the passage from which we read, Job repents of his questioning and submits himself to the purposes of God.

## II.

In the face of human suffering there are some things that can be said with certainty. It is true that a great deal of human suffering comes as the result of human freedom. God has so fashioned the world that there is a certain *quid pro quo*. Human freedom allows us to pursue activities that are harmful and can result in great suffering. People abuse alcohol, tobacco, and food and often pay dearly for that freedom. People drive cars in a reckless fashion often creating great harm for themselves and others. Human error often is the cause of great suffering and there is no denying that.

It is also true that suffering has a redemptive side. Oftentimes suffering, adversity, and great difficulty have the effect of building human character. In Romans, chapter five, the Apostle Paul writes, “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Romans 5:6).

Throughout the Old and New Testament, suffering is often seen as redemptive. It is a “refiner’s fire”—it separates the true metal from the alloy. It is a “chastening”—it separates the wheat from the chaff.

## III.

Yet, having said that, it is also clear that not all suffering can be viewed as the result of human error, nor does all suffering have a redemptive nature. A great deal of human suffering has a very random nature to it. Several weeks ago, a woman driving her car in the Dilworth section of our city was killed when a tree fell on her car. There was no apparent reason for this. The tree did not appear to be damaged. There was no raging storm. It seemed a terribly random act.

Moreover, there are numerous other instances of random suffering—hurricanes and Tsunamis and other events of nature that strike down innocent humans. Often people suffer from rare illnesses that strike down people in their youth or in the prime of life.

The New Testament acknowledges this. In John, chapter 9, Jesus encounters a man born blind. Jesus’ disciples raised the question, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he

was born blind?" On another occasion, a tower in Jerusalem fell on a group of workers, killing eighteen of them. When confronted with this tragedy Jesus replied by saying, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"(Luke 13:3).

So, let's be honest. There are no easy answers to the question of human suffering. It raises for us profound questions about God, the nature of the world in which we live, and challenges us to examine the very bedrock of our faith.

So, to quote the Apostle Paul, "What do we say to these things?"

#### IV.

One of the first things we must say is that "God's ways are not our ways, and his thoughts not our thoughts." In the Presbyterian Church we have often emphasized the radical distinction between the creator and the creature. This distinction is contained in the Latin expression "finitum non est capax infiniti"—the finite cannot contain the infinite.

That is to say, there are many things in life that we do not understand because we are not God. That was certainly a word spoken by God to Job. "Where were you," asks God, "when I laid the foundations of the earth? Have you entered the storehouses of the snow, or seen the storehouses of the hail?" (Job 38).

That distinction finds its fullest expression in the notion of the sovereignty of God. As the Apostle Paul puts, "God works for good in all things for those who love him and are called to his purposes" (Romans 8:27).

The Christian witness is that the last word in every human situation is the grace of God. God's grace is not only forgiveness and renewal, but also, as Reinhold Niebuhr has pointed out, "God's providential working in human history, by which he makes the wrath of man to praise him and transmutes good out of evil." The human situation may become difficult, but there is always hope.

Paul Tillich once described the providence of God not as a vague belief that everything would turn out well. There are some things that do not turn out well at all. Nor does it mean that everything in life is predetermined. Providence means that there is a creative and saving possibility in every situation and that the demonic forces that are present in our world and in our lives can never have an unbreakable grasp upon us.

The Christian witness is that there is a grace, the living, active personal presence of God, available in all events. This means there are no dead-end streets in life in which evil is the last word, no enclosures from which there is no exit.

That word is the final word in the poetic section of Job, where Job proclaims, "I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted... Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes"(Job 42:6).

## V.

Another word that must be said in the face of human suffering is the word of the incarnation. The gospel of John begins with the affirmation, “In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God” (John 1:1).

The Christian witness of the “word made flesh” is a direct response to the cry of Job to God, “Thou are not a man.” Job’s point is that God cannot understand human suffering. God is simply too far removed from it. James Denney, the Scottish minister, used to hold a crucifix before his congregation. There was the suffering body of Christ on the cross. “God loves like that,” announced Denney to his congregation.

The ultimate option that any one of us has in the matter of faith is the choice between the faith that the universe is the expression of impersonal powers and forces with no provision of their end, and on the other hand, the faith that the universe is the expression of purpose, intentionality, and love. These purposes and love are revealed to us through the life that Jesus lived in our midst.

This confidence in God’s creation finds expression in the hymn that declares,  
“Through many dangers, toils, and snares  
I have already come;  
‘Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home.”

## VI.

Then, finally, in the face of human suffering, we can do little else except point people to the cross of Jesus Christ. Here is suffering at its worst—an innocent man convicted for crimes he had not committed, and killed by evil people. And yet, the cross is a great sign of hope, a reminder to all of us of the power of God to bring life out of death.

In his study in Basle, Karl Barth always kept a print on the wall of Matthias Grunewald’s great painting “The Crucifixion.” In the background one sees the lifeless form of Christ being taken from the cross. In the foreground stands the figure of John the Baptist, pointing to the Christ. Barth maintained that the work of the preacher and the theologian was captured in that painting. Our job is to point people not to ourselves but to the cross which is our great symbol of hope.

That is our great hope. There is much about human suffering that eludes us. There is none of us that can explain its power. In the final analysis, there is little more that we can do except to point people to the cross of Christ, and proclaim that as our greatest evidence of the love of God.

One of the greatest sermons ever preached was preached by a Scottish minister, Arthur John Gossip. It was preached at the Beechgrove Church in Aberdeen in 1927. The title of the sermon was “But When Life Tumbles In, What Then?” The power of the sermon was that it was preached a week after Gossip’s wife had died suddenly and without warning. At the end of that sermon Gossip concludes by saying, “I don’t think you need be afraid of life. Our hearts are very

frail; and there are places where the road is very steep and very lonely. But we have a wonderful God. And as Paul puts it, "What can separate us from his love?" "Not death," he says immediately, pushing that aside at once as the most obvious of all impossibilities.

No, not death. For standing in the roaring of the Jordan, cold to the heart with its dreadful chill, and very conscious of the terror of its rushing, I too, like Hopeful, can call back to you who one day in your turn will have to cross it, "Be of good cheer, my brother, for I feel the bottom, and it is sound."

Thanks be to God. Amen.