

October 18, 2015

## Counterculture: Why, O Lord? Evil, Suffering and a Good God

### Job 1:1 – 22

This morning we are taking a look at one of the biggest problems people claim to have with Christianity – the problem of evil, suffering and the existence of a good God. The question is often framed like this: If God is good and all-powerful, why is there all this evil and suffering in the world? If He can't do anything to stop the evil and suffering, He might be good but He's not be all-powerful. On the other hand, if He is able to put an end to evil and suffering and chooses not to, then He might be all-powerful but He's not good. God, if there is a God, is either good and is powerless do away with evil and suffering, or He's all-powerful and chooses not to get do away with all the evil and suffering in the world, and therefore He's not a good God. This is not a new question.

The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, stated the problem centuries ago in four parts: "God either wishes to take away evil, and is unable, or He is able, and unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious, which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils or why does He not remove them?"<sup>1</sup>

Whenever we are confronted by evil and suffering, the question is usually always, 'Why? Why me? Why this? Why now? Why them? Why us? Why, O Lord?' When tragedy strikes, the inevitable question from believers and non-believers alike is 'Why?'. We almost never ask the question when things are going well. And the assumption is that life should be good, not bad. No one asks the question, 'Why is there good in the world?' It's always, 'Why is there evil and suffering in the world?' as though this is a naturally good world that has somehow been contaminated by evil. If you are a Christian, it isn't hard to answer the question of why there is evil in the world. You only have to look back to Genesis to see where we grabbed the reins of our own destiny and turned away from God's plan to carry out our own, and the Bible tells us that evil and suffering entered the world. And if you're not a believer, you have a bigger task of explaining why there should be good in the world, especially if you believe that the universe is a serendipitous accident of random chance.

But if there is a God who is all-powerful and good, how is it that He allows evil and suffering to continue? People often use this as an argument against the existence of God. But if you really think about it, when you argue that evil and suffering should not be, you assume an opposite condition should be, namely goodness and blessing. You are therefore, assuming the existence of a moral law. You are defining some things as evil and others as good, and saying that there is a kind of absolute morality. But if there is an absolute moral law, then by definition there must be a moral law giver. But then you are in the position of assuming the existence of God to argue that He doesn't exist. You cannot assume that there is anything you might call evil in the world without assuming that there is someone higher than us all to give the definition.<sup>2</sup>

But whether we are believers or unbelievers, evil and suffering are two of the most difficult things to understand and deal with in this life. And I want to make it clear that I don't have all the answers for you. And we probably won't deal with all the questions you might have today. But one thing is certain. You will experience evil and suffering in this life. There are lots of reasons why that is true, but I think it is enough to say that this world and all creation is broken by sin and God is in the process of restoring all things to His original intent and purpose, and the Bible says that in this world you will have trouble. And my intention this morning is to hopefully bring a little more understanding of how to walk through the inevitable evil and suffering and not be destroyed by it.

1 Martin, Michael, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, (Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1990), 334

2 <http://www.bethinking.org> How Can I Believe in God When There is so Much Suffering, Michael Ramsden

One of the best places to look at these issues is in the book of Job. There's never been a greater book written that speaks to the why of evil and suffering than this book. In fact, I believe this was intentionally put here just for this purpose. If you want to get a handle on evil and suffering, get into Job. We don't know who wrote this or when it was written. In fact we don't know a lot about this character Job except he was apparently a wealthy, well-known and wise man in the land of Uz. Although we don't even know where Uz was. But this book brings out a lot about the nature and character and working of evil and suffering in the world. Although this morning we are just going to look mainly at four things this section of Scripture teaches us: Evil and suffering are always a part of a bigger story; evil and suffering are never outside the sovereignty of God; evil and suffering only work to defeat the plans of Satan and fulfill the purpose of God; evil and suffering will always maintain some mystery.

*There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. 2 There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. 3 He possessed 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 female donkeys, and very many servants, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. 4 His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. 5 And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually.*

Here's a guy who has it all: family, money, power, influence. Life is good, and Job is a good man. His children are blessed, his fields and livestock are blessed, he's a devout and God-honoring man. And then everything changes. There was a conference in heaven, a challenge was thrown down, and it all landed on Job: *6 Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. 7 The LORD said to Satan, "From where have you come?" Satan answered the LORD and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." 8 And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" 9 Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason? 10 Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. 11 But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." 12 And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand." So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.*

The first thing to notice is that evil and suffering are always a part of the bigger story. Job has no idea that he's being talked about in heaven. Job has no idea of what's coming down. And one of the things this highlights is the fact that even though evil and suffering affect us very personally, it is not all about us. In fact, here's the Cliff Notes version of the book of Job: Job's life is really good; then Job's life is really bad; then his wife tells him to curse God and die; Job says it's not his fault; his friends say it is his fault; God says 'This is not all about you, Job'. In fact, Job never hears about this conversation in heaven. God never explains why he suffered. There is a bigger story here than just Job. The world we see around us today is not the world that God made in the beginning. Everything is affected by the sin that came in. Everything is broken and in need of restoration. All creation, Paul tells us in Romans, is groaning in anticipation of the restoration to come. And God has not abandoned creation but is working even now to restore all things. But our suffering is right in the middle of that groaning. We are part of the larger story of God's redemption and restoration of creation.

Unless we understand that we are part of a larger story of redemption and restoration, evil and suffering will consume us and rock our faith and trust in God. In this larger story, people do get sick and die. People do commit atrocities. School shootings happen, natural disasters happen, wars happen, righteous people like Job will suffer. And if we don't understand the big story, we are tempted to either respond with a moralistic answer or a cynical answer. If you're religious you might say, 'I must be doing something wrong here, otherwise God wouldn't be hitting me with this'. And you begin to focus on your behavior, because if I do what is right then God is obligated to bless me. Secular people are more cynical. That is, life is random. Stuff happens. There's no rhyme or reason. You're just unlucky. Religious people believe that if you live a good life, then good stuff happens, and they're blown away when bad stuff happens. Secular people take evil and suffering as proof that there is no God, and even if there were, He's not good and He doesn't care about you.

But Job tells us that both these ways of thinking are wrong. Job clearly tells us that evil and suffering are never outside the sovereign rule of God. Look again at that scene in heaven. There's some kind of gathering in heaven where Satan shows up. I would think that he would kind of be like the skunk at the party. But anyway God takes the initiative and asks Satan what he's been up to (as if He didn't know). And Satan tells Him, 'O here and there – everywhere in general and nowhere in particular'. And God says, 'Have you considered My servant Job?' 'There's nobody like him on the earth. He's upright, blameless, he fears Me and turns away from evil'. And Satan says, 'That's not surprising, you've put a security fence around him. I can't touch him'. Now I've heard a lot of people pray a hedge of protection around someone as if they are out there all alone and undefended and vulnerable. But this tells us that God already has a fence around His people. We don't need to pray for it. It would probably be more accurate, biblically speaking to ask God to keep that fence up.

And Satan recognizes this and says, 'Just let me inside that fence and I'll wreck him. He'll turn on You then and curse you to Your face'. And God says, 'Have at him then. You can touch everything he has, just don't touch him'. Do you notice what's going on? Everything that happens to Job, God permits. 'You can do this, but you may not do that. You can take away his stuff but you can't touch him'. God is in total control. A lot of people see the world in terms of this titanic struggle of good versus evil, God versus Satan. They assume that good and evil are in an equal strength struggle for control and that is absolutely not what is happening. There is no equal to God. Satan had to come to Him. God initiated the whole thing. Unless we understand the sovereignty of God, we will never be able to understand evil and suffering in the world.

Over and over in Scripture, the Bible makes it clear that God is sovereign over everything. He's not simply the architect and designer, He implements His design. Bruce Ware, a prominent theologian, defines the sovereignty of God like this: God plans and carries out His perfect will as He alone knows is best, over all that is in heaven and earth, and He does so without failure or defeat or fault. In other words, there is no aspect of creation over which God has no control. And His control is such that everything is working to carry out His desires and wishes. Listen to Isaiah: *The LORD of hosts has sworn: "As I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand."<sup>3</sup> I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides Me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know Me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides Me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things.<sup>4</sup>*

And when we talk about the sovereignty of God, we should not suppose that in permitting evil and suffering, that He is somehow the author of evil and suffering. God is in charge of everything, but evil and suffering are not from Him. God hates evil. He's against suffering. That is not how He created things to be. But look at the language of this dialogue in heaven. Satan says, "...*stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.*" And God says, 'Go ahead'. The stretching out of God's hand does not mean that He is the one who hits Job – that's Satan. His stretching out His hand means that He's removed the obstacles to Satan's interference in Job's life. He's allowing Satan to bring evil and suffering into Job's life. And not just the loss of his possessions and children. If we read chapter two we would see where even the restriction against touching Job personally was removed and he's reduced to sitting on the ash heap, scraping his sores.

That raises the third thing we see here, evil and suffering only work to defeat the plans of Satan and fulfill the purpose of God. If you go to the end of the story, God is vindicated, Job is restored and Satan suffers defeat. Satan was only allowed to bring evil and suffering into Job's life to the extent that it actually works to defeat Satan's agenda and fulfill God's agenda. What was Satan's agenda? To discredit God. To cause Job to curse God. God created man to glorify Him, not curse Him. But what happens? Look at verse 20: *20 Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. 21 And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." 22 In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.* The evil that Satan intended was turned to worship in Job's life. And if you go to the end of the story again you see that Job again worships God, repenting in dust and ashes for trying to vindicate himself, and God gets the glory.

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3 Isaiah 14:24

4 Isaiah 45:5-7

Listen, this is a pattern all through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. One good example is the story of Joseph. Satan works in the lives of Joseph's brothers to sell him into slavery. But what happens? They show up years later and he's not only not a slave, he's the nearest thing to a king they've ever met. And do you remember how the conversation goes? *His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."*<sup>5</sup>

God allowed evil and suffering into Joseph's life for His own good purposes. What we can be sure of, evil and suffering are at best servants of God to accomplish His plan and His purposes in our lives. God is not the author of evil and suffering. Evil and suffering are in the world through our own rebellion and sin, instigated by the leader of the rebellion, Satan. But in redeeming and restoring His creation, God permits evil and suffering only to the degree that it accomplishes His will and purpose. He will allow evil and suffering into your life only to the degree that it defeats Satan's plans for you.

My grandfather and grandmother on my mother's side came from a very unbelieving background. They were hard workers and hard drinkers. In fact when my grandfather was a young man during the Prohibition era, he and one of his brothers made and sold gin they made in the bathtub. They were about as far from God as you could get. But God had his eye on Alvin. They had three children, my mom and her sister and my uncle, and then they had Sandy. Sandy was the apple of my grandad's eye. She was a bright and beautiful 2 year old little girl. But one day she got sick, and she wasn't getting better so they took her to the hospital, and shortly after being admitted, she died. My grandparents were devastated. They were inconsolable. But they had been sending their two oldest daughters to a Sunday School at a church nearby, and one night they dropped in on the service. They would never have gone if they hadn't been feeling like the ground had dropped away under their feet. And it was there they heard the gospel of Jesus Christ for the first time and they came to Christ that night.

As my uncle was sharing this at my grandmother's graveside memorial, with all the cousins and uncles and aunts gathered around, he said, 'Look at the sovereignty of God's hand on this family. See what God has brought out of this tragedy of Sandy's death'. And looking around I was seeing a legacy of faith that had been passed on from generation to generation. After his conversion my grandfather became active in the Full Gospel Businessmen's organization in Everett, and served many years as the president there, sharing the gospel, mentoring young men and making a difference for Jesus in his corner of the world. Whenever I talked with him he would talk about the goodness of God and he was always saying things like, 'This Bible is God's word. He said it. I believe it'. He took several mission trips to India, and was always active in the church. One of his daughters became a missionary to Africa and the other one married a pastor (my father). Today he has grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and great-great-great grandchildren who know God and are serving Him. What Satan meant for evil, God meant for good.

You see, the evil and suffering that Satan is working, only serves to fulfill and accomplish what God desires to happen, always. But the truth is, evil and suffering will always maintain somewhat of a mystery. That is, you may never know on this side of heaven the reasons why God saw fit to allow evil and suffering into your life. Job never knew. God never told him about the conversations He had with Satan or the challenge thrown down. Job never hears about this. He has no idea this is why he is suffering. A lot of people have the thought that '...if I just knew how this would end I could bear it. If I could see the good that God intends, this evil and suffering would be endurable'. But the way God proves Satan wrong was by never letting Job know that particular why. You see, Satan told God, 'Of course Job loves you. You've given him everything. He's got family and fame and fortune. You keep him inside this wall of protection. But just break down that wall take away all that stuff, and You'll see He doesn't love you. He loves Your stuff.'

The only way to be certain that you are loving God for Himself rather than for what you can get out of Him, is by being brought to a place where loving God doesn't get you anything. It's by being put in a place where loving God may mean losing stuff, not getting stuff. In fact, loving God may bring disaster, not blessing into your life. You see God doesn't let Job know the why here, and in doing so, completely destroys Satan's argument.

In the middle of his suffering, Job says: *"Behold, I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I do not perceive him; on the left hand when he is working, I do not behold him; he turns to the right hand, but I do not see him.* In other words, 'I can't see that You are doing anything good here God. You don't seem to be in this at all.' Any yet he says, *'But He knows the way that I take; when He has tried me, I shall come out as gold. My foot has held fast to His steps; I have kept His way and have not turned aside. I have not departed from the commandment of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my portion of food.'*<sup>6</sup>

You see, if you build your life on the things of God, what God can do for you, instead of on God Himself, when those things desert you, you'll desert God. This was evidently true of Job's wife. We don't often think of this, but when Job lost everything, so did she – the money, the status, her children. Everyone used to look up to her as Job's wife. She was important, she had influence. Now her husband is sitting on the garbage heap, naked and scraping his sores. No money, no family, no respect. And when she sees how things are, her advice is 'Curse God and die'. Look at chapter two real quick and read what she said in verse 9: *'Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die.'* In other words, 'Look at where following God has gotten you? You'd be better off dead'. Now there's been a lot said about Job's wife, but you have to say she's been through a lot. And Job answers her so graciously, *'You speak as one of the foolish women speaks'*. I say graciously because he doesn't actually call her a fool – he says, 'You **sound** like one of those people who do not know God'. *'Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?'*<sup>7</sup>

If you base your satisfaction and joy on stuff, then evil and suffering and loss will lead you away from joy and happiness. But if you base your satisfaction and joy in God, then evil and suffering will serve to bring you closer to God. Suffering will only drive you into Him, not lead you away. You see Satan said 'Job only serves you for what he can get'. And God said, 'No, that's not true'. And the proof of that was in the suffering. You know, Job starts out really well here, but he's not perfect. There was still a measure of self-serving you see as you go through the rest of the book. But it is only by the end of thing that you can see that it was through what he suffered that his motives were purified. It's in the end where we see Jobs theology fully line up with his experience. We have to be willing for God to put us into the furnace of suffering in order for the gold to be exposed. It is there that the motives of our heart are purified and we begin to love God for who He is, not for what He gives.

But where all these questions of evil and suffering come together in a beautiful, complete display of God's goodness and sovereignty over everything is the cross of Christ. Job was only a relatively innocent man, but Jesus was actually innocent. Job was relatively obedient, but Jesus was perfectly obedient. Job asked why and God didn't answer but He did show up at the end. He was there all the way through it, but Job only recognized Him in the end. And in the end Job realizes that He was never abandoned by God the way he thought he had been. But Jesus was totally abandoned by God. On the cross, the Father turned His face away, and it is Jesus we hear saying, 'Why have You forsaken Me?' Job had merely been assaulted by God. It was Satan's doing, but by God's permission. But the Bible tells us that Yahweh was pleased to crush Jesus. He was perfect, yet He was put to death. He was obedient, yet He was crushed. He was God, and yet He became a man subject to all the frailties of humanity.

And in this God made evil and suffering serve His purpose. *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*<sup>8</sup> You see God loved us, not for what we could do for Him. What could we possibly do for Him? But in doing that He paved the way for us to love Him just for who He is. And He teaches us this through the things that we suffer. And out of the greatest evil, the worst suffering, came the highest glory and triumph in the universe. Evil and suffering and death Paul says was swallowed up in victory. *For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory."*<sup>9</sup>

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6 Job 23:8-12

7 Job 2:9-10

8 John 3:16

9 1 Corinthians 15:52-55

What does that mean? Swallowed up? All the evil and suffering was swallowed up in the cross of Christ? What that means is that for those who trust in Christ, all the evil that has been permitted into their lives, all the suffering and loss, will, in the final analysis, be revealed for the good it was intended. What Satan intends for evil, God makes it serve the good He intends. God is in the process of restoring all things. All of the suffering, all of the pain, everything bad in our lives will be swallowed up in the resurrection and made infinitely better than it would have been if we'd never gone through any of it. In his book, *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis wrote: "[Some mortals] say of some temporal suffering, 'No future bliss can make up for it,' not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory."<sup>10</sup> Or in the words of Sam the Wise, 'Everything sad will come untrue'.

In his new book, *Killing Christians*, Tom Doyle writes: *Forty Egyptian churches burned to the ground; house church leaders sentenced to long terms in Iran's infamous Evin prison; eighty Christians murdered in North Korea for merely owning a Bible; Believers nailed to crosses in Syria. And that's the news from just one month in 2014.*<sup>11</sup> Kim and September and I spent the day with over 700 other people at the VOM conference at Overlake Christian Church yesterday, listening to believers from Syria, Iran, China and the Middle East, sharing their stories of evil and suffering they and other Christians have endured in recent years. And on the face of it – it looks bad. It looks as though the forces of evil are in control. But the message from every part of the world through these Christians who are suffering and being killed for the sake of the gospel is always the same: Jesus is winning.

One young man, John, from Syria shared how before all the war and bloodshed in that country, believers were praying for revival and a great harvest in their country. He imagined stadiums filled with people listening to powerful messages of the gospel, repenting and coming to Christ and filling the churches. But the Syrian Christians prayed, and God answered...with a bloody civil war that has killed hundreds of thousands, made refugees of millions, destroyed the economy and the country and brought incredible suffering to the church in particular. But what John and the other Syrian believers have seen is their prayer being answered. Hundreds of thousands now are coming to Christ and the churches are filled to overflowing. Syrian Christians no longer pray that the war would end, they pray that God would use the war to glorify His name.

*Our gracious God and loving Father,*

*Thank You for Your word that tells us that evil and suffering are only part of a larger story of redemption and restoration that You are writing. Encourage our hearts with the assurance that You are sovereign over everything and that nothing is outside Your control and plan. And even though we do not know now all the answers to our why's we do know that Your loving hand only allows evil and suffering in our lives to work to defeat the plans of Your enemy and fulfill Your purpose on the earth. We can look to the cross this morning and know that You love us because we see Jesus who suffered for us, not that we would not suffer, but that we might become like Him. Grant that we would face the evil and suffering in this world with joy and confidence and trust in You so that our lives would bear testimony to the goodness of a good God and spread Your glory in this earth we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

***May the Lord bless you and keep you  
and make His face shine upon you.  
May the Lord be gracious unto you;  
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you  
and give you peace.***

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<sup>10</sup> <http://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/justintaylor/2011/04/25/everything-sad-will-come-untrue/>

<sup>11</sup> Doyle, Tom, *Killing Christians: Living the Faith Where It's Not Safe to Believe*, (W Publishing Group, Nashville Tenn. 2015), ix