

January 17, 2016

Why Do the Innocent Suffer?

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Job 1:13-22

Opening words: Someone once asked British novelist and lay theologian C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), "Why do the righteous suffer?" "Why not?" he replied. "They're the only ones who can take it." Unless you are living in a coma, you know we have a surplus of suffering in our world. Suffering does not discriminate. It is universal; no one escapes. It is found in both the east and the west. It is found among the young and the not so young. It is found among men and women. It is found among the wealthy and the poor. It is found among the educated and the uneducated, the ambitious and the not so ambitious. Suffering is found among both believers and non-believers. No one escapes; everyone suffers at one time or another. The question is not, how will we escape the suffering; the question is, when will we suffer?

With this fact clearly stated, I begin a new four-part sermon series today, *Why Do the Innocent Suffer?* The inspiration of this series came from the first chapter of Adam Hamilton's book, "*Why?*" I had originally intended to look at the entire book, but the first chapter is so rich, I decided to spend some time there. He does an excellent job of breaking down this sad topic. Next week's message is called *Suffering Caused by Natural Disasters*. Then comes, *Suffering Caused by Human Decisions*. I'll conclude, on February 7th, with *Suffering Caused by Disease*. Today's message is called *Why Do the Innocent Suffer?* Our scripture lesson for today is Job 1:13-22.

Job 1:13-22 One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, ¹⁴ a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, ¹⁵ and the Sabeans attacked and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

¹⁶ While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The fire of God fell from the heavens and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

¹⁷ While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

¹⁸ While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, "Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, ¹⁹ when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

²⁰ At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship ²¹ and said:

"Naked I came from my mother's womb,
and naked I will depart.

The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away;
may the name of the LORD be praised."

²²In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) once wrote, *"To live is to suffer, to survive is to find the meaning in the suffering."* If you have ever suffered, say, **"Amen!"**

Several months ago, I officiated at a wedding in the St. James Meeting House in Boardman Park. I have officiated at several weddings in Boardman Park this year. They call me because they want a minister, but don't have a church. On Friday night, I showed up at the rehearsal. Everyone was excited and in a good mood. At the conclusion of the rehearsal, the bride invited me to the rehearsal dinner. Kathryn was out of town so I decided to go. I planned on dining and dashing. I had other things I needed to do. This is the truth. When I walked into the restaurant, everyone ignored me. Some people are uncomfortable talking to a minister. (I think it is because I am too handsome.) I was relieved when the father of the groom walked up to me and asked me to sit with his family. His name was Jeff and he was simply a good guy. I just met him that evening, but I felt like we had known each other for years. Somewhere in our discussion, he confessed that the next day was not only his son's wedding day, but his anniversary. I asked him the appropriate questions. "How long have you been married?" And, "Where were you married?" He gave me an educated guess on the number of years and he wasn't sure of the location. I responded, "You don't know where you were married?" He tried to explain his ignorance by telling me he was an atheist. I said, "You don't believe there is a God? Jeff said, "No!" I asked, "Have you always been an atheist?" "No! I used to believe in the existence of God but stopped believing because of all the suffering in the world. Why would a loving God permit innocent people to suffer?" I found his honesty to be refreshing. Do you know of anyone, like Jeff, who doesn't even believe there is a God because of all the suffering? Do you know of anyone who is mad at God because of all the suffering in the world? Be honest with me: if all the suffering in the world bothers you, say, **"Amen!"** Let me state the obvious. There is a surplus of suffering in our world. Suffering comes in three categories.

Sometimes suffering is caused by natural disasters. It takes the form of a tornado, tsunami or a wild fire. On January 12, 2010, it took the form of an earthquake. The epicenter of that earthquake was near Port-au-Prince, Haiti. The exact number who died on that island nation was somewhere between 100,000 and 360,000 people. The Haitians thought they knew poverty before that earthquake. That earthquake took their poverty to a new level. Six years later, people still aren't sure what to do. Money and sincerity can't solve every problem. Sometimes suffering is caused by natural disasters.

Sometimes suffering is caused by human decisions. You marry the wrong person, you invest in the wrong business. You decide to drink and drive and take the lives of innocent people. The country of Syria has been suffering through a civil war since 2011. The revolutionaries are protesting against their own government, and the government responded with violent crackdowns. Various world organizations have accused President Bashar al-Assad's government of various human rights violations. How far has the violence and suffering gone? NBC news reported the other night that the latest weapon in the war is food. The videos were painful to watch. One little boy, just skin and bones, laid in a fetal position and said he hadn't eaten in a week. He was existing on a small amount of water. Their president has decided to stay. Sometimes suffering is caused by human decisions.

Sometimes suffering is caused by disease. We have no shortage of disease in this world. The longer we live, the more diseases emerge. Sometimes the disease wins. If you don't believe me, then travel to Hospice House. I have been there too many times. The environment is pleasant. The staff is wonderful and the building is nice. However, the purpose for its existence can't be forgotten. It is the last stop in someone's life. Death is always shocking. Sometimes suffering is caused by disease. I am going to look at the Christian response to these three causes of suffering over the next three weeks, but today I am going to look at the primary source of all suffering, Satan. So if you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the Old Testament book of Job. It is part of the Old Testament called the wisdom literature. Written about the year 1500 BC, by an unknown author, it stands beside Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. Written in Hebrew, it is extremely difficult to translate. However, what is more important to us than the background of the book is the storyline of the book. You know the story; everybody knows the story.

Job was a man who was blameless and upright. He feared God and shunned evil (1:1). He had everything in this world a man could desire. He was wealthy and his family had no obvious problems. The best part was that God, Himself, was proud of him. One day Satan comes before God and admits he has been roaming the world. He must have experienced many people in the world, but none could measure up to Job. God highlights Job for his excellence but Satan is not impressed. Cynical to his core, he questions Job's behavior. Why not worship God if you have everything? Satan believes Job will change his tune once some hardship arrives in his perfect life. God grants Satan permission to test Job's faith. Over a period of time, Job loses everything—money, relationships and wealth. So to speak, he goes from the penthouse to the outhouse. He loses everything this world has to offer, but his faith remains intact. In the end, Job passes the test. Job does not stand alone.

The Bible is filled with many people who experienced suffering first hand. The Bible doesn't tell us about people who God protected from hardship and suffering; the Bible tells us about people who cling to the faith in spite of their suffering. How many

examples do you need? The son of Jacob, Joseph, the well-built handsome young man, was sold into slavery. The Israelites spent 400 years enslaved by the Egyptians. Moses led them to freedom, but suffered along the way. He prayed to God to take his life. King Saul spent many years trying to kill the young David. The entire book of Lamentations was written after Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and they carried her inhabitants into exile. In the New Testament, only one of the original disciples, John, died of natural causes. Most were martyred. Even John suffered on the island of Patmos, where he had a series of visions we call *Revelation*. The Apostle Paul didn't fare much better. The scriptures tell us he was shipwrecked, beaten, flogged, exposed to the elements, and left for dead. Even our Master, Jesus, knew suffering. He was beaten and bruised before being nailed to the cross. The Bible is filled with people who experienced suffering first hand. People who get mad at God about the suffering simply don't read the Bible.

Suffering is even found in church history. One of the most historic creeds within the church is the Nicene Creed. It was accepted in the year 325 in present-day Turkey, near Istanbul. At the Nicene Council, 318 delegates attended. It was reported that fewer than 12 had not lost an eye or lost a hand or did not limp on a leg lamed by torture for their Christian faith. Suffering is part of the faith. Why do you think you should be excused? Suffering is part of a disciple's life. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

When I was in seminary, I took a class on theodicy. What is theodicy? It is the combination of two Greek words, the word for God and the word for justice. The entire course was built on the question for today, why do the innocent suffer? The professor told us we needed a strong theology of suffering if we were going to survive in the ministry. He was right. In the ministry, you work with people who are suffering regularly. In that class, we were required to develop our own theology of suffering.

This is my theology of suffering in a nutshell. It is grounded in the book of Job. We may live in God's creation and it is a great place. Nature, all four seasons, testify to God's greatness. The world is a great place to spend 100 years! However, while we may live in God's creation, we also live in Satan's playground. Our world is not always a pretty place; our world can be downright ugly. The source of all that ugliness, the source of all that suffering, is Satan. Do you remember the categories? There is suffering from natural disasters: earthquakes, tornado and tsunami. There is suffering from poor human decisions: mass shootings, drinking and driving. There is suffering from disease, cancer and other diseases with no cure. Listen to what I am about to say. Every day, we play the part of the Old Testament character, Job. Satan places suffering in our world because Satan wants us to denounce our faith. However, we won't do it, because we are disciples of Jesus Christ. We know this world is not the main event; it is only the warm-up act. Someday, we are going to heaven! If you would like to go to heaven, say, **"Amen!"** German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) once wrote, *"To live is to suffer, to survive is to find the meaning in the suffering."*

Will you pray with me?