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Where Is God When It Hurts? Part 3: Our Response to Suffering

Introduction

In his book *Where Is God When It Hurts*, Philip Yancey describes an experiment that was conducted by a psychologist at Johns Hopkins University a number of years ago.ⁱ The researcher wanted to find out how a ‘sense of hope’ might impact that way that two wild rats reacted to an intense and life-threatening challenge.

- So he took the first rat...dropped it in tank of water...and waited to see what would happen. As it turns out, rats are pretty good swimmers...so the animal paddled and thrashed around for almost 60 hours before it finally became exhausted and drowned.

The second rat was put through a similar test, but this time—before the researcher dropped the animal in the water—he held it tightly in his hands for several minutes...just long enough for the rat to stop struggling. And this time (when the rat went in the tank) it splashed around for only a few minutes...before it sank to the bottom and died.

- In reflecting on this outcome, the psychologist theorized that the second rat simply ‘gave up.’ As Yancey describes it: “The futility of the struggle in the researcher’s hands had convinced the rat that its fate was hopeless...even before it hit the water. In effect, Rat Two died of resigned helplessness.”

Now just in case you’re wondering, I’m not trying to suggest that we bear a striking resemblance lab rats. But I do think the results of this experiment are just interesting enough to make us wonder: What do we do when we face intense and even life-threatening challenges? When pain and hurt and suffering come our way...how do we respond?

Transition

This is the last week in a short series of sermons focused on Job and organized around the question: Where is God when it hurts? And just in case you missed anything, let me remind you that we started by affirming some of the ‘up-sides’ of suffering.

- Obviously, none of us want to go through times of physical or emotional pain...and yet, those pains can alert us to danger and protect us from even greater harm. They can build character and nurture godly qualities in our lives. And—if we’re open to letting God use us in this way—our times of suffering can even become a point of connection that allows us to minister to others who are facing a similar crisis.

We followed up last week by looking at the question: Why? When times of hurting come, it’s only natural for us to look for some reason or meaning behind our pain...and scripture offers a number of options to consider. Our suffering might be a punishment for sin—or a consequence of some action that we or others took. God might let us go through hardship to test us in some way—or to teach us some important lesson.

- Maybe—when you get right down to it—there is no ‘reason why’ behind our suffering...at least no reason that we can understand. Maybe suffering is a mystery (that’s hidden deep in the purposes of God)...and we’ll only understand it (if we ever do at all) when we see it from the perspective of our heavenly home.

The Real Issue: Our Response to Suffering

But as I noted right at the end of last week’s message, the Bible doesn’t really encourage us to spend too much time asking “Why?” Yes, there can be value in trying to find some meaning in our suffering. But ultimately, the Bible wants us to ask a different question.

- Instead of asking, “Why?” the Bible wants us to ask, “To what end?” or “For what purpose?”
- Instead of focusing on the almost-impossible-to-answer question: “What is the reason for our pain?” scripture asks “What are we gonna do about our pain? What will be our response?”

This is actually the issue that lies at the heart of the book of Job. I don't know how much time you've spent reading or studying Job...but if you don't pay close attention, it can be easy to get pulled off course. Because you see; the vast majority of the book—everything, in fact, from chapter 3 to chapter 37—seems to focus almost exclusively on the question “Why?”

- Job cries out, looking for meaning in his pain...and his friends (repeatedly and not-all-that helpfully) try to explain it to him...usually by offering answers that put the blame squarely on him.

But all of this back-and-forth about cause takes place in a broader context: the context of a wager between God and Satan. I suspect you know the story. According to chapter 1, Job is blameless and upright; he fears God and shuns evil. And one day (in the throne room of heaven), God is bragging about him. The Lord says to Satan, “Have you seen my servant Job? There's not a man on earth like him.”

- And Satan says, “Well, duh!” (At least, that's what he says in the Revised International Teenage Version of the Bible. In more standard translations, he says...) “Does Job fear God for nothing?! You've blessed him and protected him. But put out your hand and strike him, and he'll curse you to your face.”
- And God is willing to take that bet...because (when you stop and think about it) this wager is (in many ways) a re-enactment of God's original question in creation: Will the people I created and who I love choose for me...or against me? From God's point of view, that's the central question of history, starting with Adam and running on down through Job and every man and woman who has ever lived.ⁱⁱ

That's why tragedy comes upon Job. It's not because he sinned and needs to be punished. It's not because God wants to teach him a lesson. It's to find out: How will Job respond? As Philip Yancey observes, “Despite the fact that all but a few pages of Job deal with the problem of pain...I'm coming to the conclusion that Job isn't really about the problem of pain. Suffering does contribute the ingredients of the story, but not the central theme. Seen as a whole, Job is primarily about faith...how will the main character respond? Will Job trust God or deny him?”ⁱⁱⁱ

- So how does Job respond? And what can that teach us about our response when times of hurting come?

Our Response: Be Prepared

Well for starters, I think Job shows us that one important way we respond to suffering—is to be prepared for suffering. In his book, Philip Yancey tells the story of a friend who suddenly found herself battling a crippling disease. And yet...in spite of the hardship that she and her husband faced...he saw that the experience actually drew them closer together...rather than driving them apart. So when he asked them how they managed...they responded, “The best way to prepare for suffering is to work on a strong, supportive life when you're healthy. You cannot suddenly fabricate foundations of strength; they must have been building all along.”^{iv}

- Job builds those foundations—he prepares for suffering—and he does so in at least three ways:

First and foremost, he pursues a vital relationship with God. When Job's story begins, we don't just hear from God's own lips that Job is “blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.” We see the evidence in Job's life.

- In chapter 1, we learn that Job's children occasionally had parties to celebrate special occasions: “And when a period of feasting had run its course, Job would make arrangements for them to be purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, ‘Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.’ This was Job's regular custom.”^v
- Later we read that Job enjoyed ‘intimate friendship’ with God (29:4)...that he was ‘a father to the needy and took up the case of the stranger’ (29:16) Job wasn't content to take his relationship with God for granted. Instead, he worked at it. He made it a priority. And that faithfulness gave Job deep, spiritual resources that helped him to be prepared when hardship came.

What's more, I think that faithfulness contributed to the second way that Job prepared for suffering: He developed a realistic attitude about the place of pain in human life. In the first week of this series, we talked about the way that painful experiences often make us want to lift our eyes to heaven and cry out, "Why me!?"

- But if we stop and think for a moment, we might realize that we'd do just as well to cry out, "Why not me?" After all, the Bible says that God causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good...and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous^{vi}...and Jesus himself left no doubt: In this world you will have trouble.^{vii}
- And when we see—at least Job's initial response to suffering—we see him adopting that same, realistic attitude: The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. (Job 1:21)

And what I'd like us to see this morning...is that the great thing about this attitude...the helpful thing about having realistic assumptions regarding the place of suffering in our lives...is that it allows us to use our smaller hurts to prepare for our bigger ones. Pastor John Ortberg—in the book *God Is Closer than You Think*—suggests that we can practice God's presence in moments of what he calls 'mini-pain.'

- "Suppose I'm frustrated," he says, "by standing in line at a 7-11. That may be a 1 on a pain scale of 1000...but I can, in a sense, use it as a tool. I can ask God to be present with me in my frustration at having to wait. I can look for him in the presence of the clerk behind the counter who doesn't speak English very well. The practice of walking with God in mini-pain can serve people well when larger pain comes."^{viii}

Last but not least, I think that Job prepares for suffering by developing deep relationships with others. It's no accident that when Job's 3 friends learn about the tragedies that strike him—they come to him...and they weep with him...and they sit with him in silence for 7 days, because they see how great his suffering is.

- In spite of our 'independent' and 'do-it-yourself' attitudes, isn't it generally true that—when it comes to suffering—we need the support and encouragement of others? We need the prayers and acts of kindness. We need the reminder—that even when we can't see God's hand—God's hand still holds us. And the reason we know that...is because we feel the presence of God's hand through its most important 'stand-in': the church or the Body of Christ...which is, of course, the hands and feet of Jesus.
- These relationships that we have with others—especially others who part of God's family—are so important that Philip Yancey says: "Today, if I had to answer the question 'Where is God when it hurts?' in a single sentence, I would make that sentence another question: 'Where is the church when it hurts?' We form the front line of God's response to the suffering world."^{ix}

Our Response: Be Honest

So Job teaches us to be prepared: to pursue a vital relationship with God...to be realistic about the role of suffering in our lives...and to develop deep relationships with others. But that's not all he teaches. In addition, I think Job demonstrates—that when suffering comes—it's important to be honest...with ourselves, with others and with God.

Unfortunately, this often seems to be surprisingly difficult for us...especially those of us who've spent much time in church...because many of us seem to have learned somewhere that 'good Christians' don't complain. Good Christians don't get angry about the hardships they face. They don't question God or question the way He works. No, 'good Christians' just smile and rejoice. Good Christians do what Job did in chapter 1; they say, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

- But let's remember: That's just chapter 1. By the beginning of chapter 3, Job curses the day of his birth...and for the next 34 chapters, Job "pours out a level of bitterness, confusion, sorrow and anger toward God that is staggering."^x
- Now, as John Ortberg points out: not only Job...but also many other books of the Bible...are filled with what he calls these 'prayers of complaint.' "People of other ancient religions prayed," he writes, "but only Israel, in all the ancient world, prayed like this...because only Israel in all the ancient world believed that God cares about our pain...and (only Israel believed that) he can be expected to do something about it."

And that—of course—is what makes these prayers (this honesty) so powerful. “When we are passionately honest with God,” Ortberg says, “when we’re not indulging in self-pity but are genuinely opening ourselves up to God...when we complain in the hope that He can still be trusted—then we are asking God to create the kind of condition in our hearts that will make resting in his presence possible again.”^{xi}

I believe that one of the most valuable ministries we can offer to friends who are suffering...is to give them a ‘safe space’ in which they can be completely open about what they’re feeling. We don’t need to explain why they’re facing hardship. We don’t need to ‘solve’ their problems. We certainly don’t need to tell them, “You shouldn’t feel that way; everything will be alright.” We just need to listen...and let them know that their pain matters.

- Yancey points out that “the Book of Job gives two responses to disappointment with God. The first was shown by Job’s friends, (who said), ‘Suppress your feelings.’ The second response, Job’s, was a rambling mess. And which of the two responses does the book endorse? God ordered the pious friends to crawl repentantly to Job and ask him to pray on their behalf. One bold message of the Book of Job is that you can say anything to God.”^{xii}

Our Response: Trust

How should we respond to suffering? Job teaches us to be prepared. He shows us that it’s okay to be honest. And finally, I think Job demonstrates that we need to trust tenaciously in God. Outside of Jesus, there’s probably no one in scripture who suffers the way that Job does. But even though he wonders why...and even though he shares openly his feelings of betrayal and abandonment...yet—even in the depth of his suffering—Job refuses to give up on God. Listen to what he says in the 19th chapter:

“O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book!

For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;

and after my skin has been destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side; my eyes will look at Him, and not as a stranger. How my heart yearns within me! (NRSV, HCSB, TNIV)

How do we develop a faith like that? How do we cling that tightly to God, even when life seems to be crashing down around us? Honestly: there are days that I’m not sure I know. I do think that ‘being prepared’ (as we’ve already discussed) does help. But there’s one more thing—one more ‘realization,’ if you will—that we never find stated clearly in the Book of Job...but which we do find ‘hinted at’ in a thought-provoking way. Listen to what Job says in chapter 9—right in the middle of his pain:

²⁹ I have already been found guilty, so why should I struggle?

³² God is not human like me, so I cannot answer him. We cannot meet each other in court.

³³ I wish there were someone to make peace between us, someone to decide our case.

³⁴ Maybe he could remove God’s punishment so his terror would no longer frighten me.

³⁵ Then I could speak without being afraid, but I am not able to do that.

Job yearned for a mediator...someone who could stand between himself and God...someone and who could make peace between them. And while Job may not have known someone like that—we do. Because we know Jesus...who was human like us, but also divine...who can empathize with our weakness because he was tempted in every way, but did not sin^{xiii}...who was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.

- And because we know Jesus, we know that God doesn’t sit in heaven, looking down on our pain uncaringly. Instead, we know that God was in Christ—reconciling the world to himself.^{xiv} If we’re looking for a reason to trust tenaciously in God—even when we suffering—I don’t think we could do much better than this: God understands suffering, because he experienced it himself. And not only did he experience it; he triumphed over it—leaving us a cross and an empty tomb as the signs of his victory.

Conclusion

Job trusted in God...and if we follow Job's story to the end, we find that God rewarded that trust. In chapter 38...after many long chapters of listening to Job cry out and wonder why and try to explain suffering...God finally speaks. Now I've gotta confess—that at first glance, at least—what God says doesn't seem to be all that comforting. God doesn't pat Job on the head and tell him that everything will be alright. He doesn't answer Job's questions about 'why?' or put Job's suffering in a broader context so he can understand it better.

- Instead, all God does is ask questions...questions that Job can't answer. "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations (38:4)? What is the way to the abode of the light (38:19)? Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain...to water a land where no one lives? (38:25-6)" Quite frankly, it seems a little mean.

But I have to thank Pastor Ortberg again for helping me see God's speech in a different light. He points out that "God's questions (really serve to) indicate something about the kind of person he is. They're filled with references to God's extravagant goodness and provision...even when there's no 'strategic gain' in it at all. Why would God water 'a land where no one lives?' Because God is a God of gratuitous goodness. He is uncontrollably generous. He is irrationally loving. He is good for no reason at all. What God is really telling Job is, 'I'm worth it. Life...following me—it's all worth it. Don't give up.' Job never does find out about the conversation in heaven...But he finds out about something better. He finds out who God is."^{xv}

- That's why—when Job responds to God's speech at the very end of the book—he says, "I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted...My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you." (42:2, 5)

And the good news this morning is that we can see God, too. Even when we're suffering...even when trials and hardships are crashing down around us...even when we're hurting, and we're asking ourselves, "Where is God when it hurts?" we can know that God is with us...just as He promised He would be...because (as Paul put it), "the same God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God displayed in the face of Christ."^{xvi}

- Won't you put your trust in Christ today? If you've never accepted him as your Lord and Savior...if you've been looking for a church home and you've finally decided that this is the place...if you're hurting...and you just need to be reminded how much God cares...won't you reach out to him to discover that he's been reaching out to you?
- As the hymn puts it: Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.
- That's our hymn of response this morning—found on your bulletin insert. Come and look to him as we sing together...

ⁱ Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts*, (Zondervan, 1990), p.187.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 181, 182.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 168.

^v Job 1:5.

^{vi} Matthew 5:45.

^{vii} John 16:33.

^{viii} John Ortberg, *God Is Closer than You Think* (Zondervan, 2005), p. 159.

^{ix} Yancey, *Where Is God*, 247.

^x Ortberg, *God Is Closer*, p. 157.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 161.

^{xii} Yancey, *Where is God*, p. 263.

^{xiii} Hebrews 4:15.

^{xiv} 2 Corinthians 5:19.

^{xv} Ortberg, *God Is Closer*, p. 163, 164, 165.

^{xvi} 2 Corinthians 4:6.