

Suffering as Mystery (Part 4)

Job 38:1-7, 12-18; 42:1-6

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Prayer: God of truth and true wisdom, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and redeemer. Amen.

This morning's sermon is the final message in our series on the problem of suffering. Over the past few weeks, we've explored several reasons why we suffer, and last Sunday, we began looking at the Book of Job. Before we return to Job for today's conclusion, let me say how much I've enjoyed preaching on this topic. Years ago, I took a seminary class on the Book of Job, and it has challenged and fascinated me ever since. I still learn something new every time. So thank you to the person who suggested this series.

Last Sunday, we focused on the prose section of the book—the prologue and the epilogue. Its message, as it relates to why we suffer, is that sometimes **the innocent suffer as a test of faith**. God allows the accuser—the *ha-satan*—to afflict Job to see whether he will remain faithful. And Job does. He endures tremendous suffering without complaint, and in the end, God restores everything he lost.

But that prose section shows only one side of Job—the patient Job, as it were, the Job who quietly endures. Today, we turn to the poetry section, where we meet a very different man: Job the challenger. Here Job insists on his innocence and boldly questions God's ways. His friends even accuse him of blasphemy for doing so.

In these poetic dialogues, three friends come to visit him—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Together, they represent the best of ancient wisdom about God, suffering, and the human condition. The dialogue unfolds in a series of back-and-forth speeches: Job speaks, a friend responds; Job replies, the next friend responds; and so on. This cycle repeats three times.

Their debate revolves around three big questions: Is God truly just? Does God run the universe on strict principles of justice? If so, how do we explain Job's suffering? These three questions echo the classic problem of **theodicy**—God's justice, which you may recall from our first sermon. It's built on a syllogism with three simple premises:

1. God is **all-powerful**.
2. God is **all-loving**.
3. Yet, there is **suffering in the world**.

How can all three statements be true at the same time?

Before we dive into the debate between Job and his friends, we should acknowledge something the friends got right. When they first saw Job's condition, they didn't preach or scold. They simply sat with him. They wept with him. For seven days and seven nights, they said nothing—no blaming, no shaming, no easy answers. It was a ministry of presence, the very thing we're called to offer those who are grieving. Not, "Your loved one is no longer in pain," or "They're in a better place." We mean well when we say those things, but silence and presence often speak more compassionately than the well-meant phrases we reach for.

We only wish Job's friends had stayed silent, but they didn't. Eventually, they begin accusing him. Convinced that suffering must be punishment for sin, they insist he must have done something wrong.

As we'll see, Job and his friends actually share the same basic assumption about how God's justice works: a strict system of reward and punishment. Do good and God rewards you. Do evil and God punishes you.

But Job pushes back against his friends. Throughout his speeches, he insists on two things: he is innocent, and his suffering is not divine punishment. And from the prologue, we know both claims are true—God calls Job righteous and blameless. So Job reaches a disturbing conclusion: either God doesn't run the world according to justice, or even worse, God is unjust.

Job's friends disagree. They argue that God is just and therefore must run the world according to this principle. For them, the logic is simple: Job suffers, therefore Job must be guilty. They repeatedly conclude that Job is guilty across their speeches. He should repent, and if he does, God will restore him. If he refuses, he's only proving his stubbornness before a God who punishes those who deserve it. In this sense, Job's friends echo the prophetic view that suffering is a punishment for sin.

After the three friends finish, a fourth speaker enters the scene: a young man named Elihu (Job 32-37). Elihu is sharp, but also arrogant. He

believes he understands God's justice better than anyone else. He insists they all submit to God's majesty. For Elihu, creation itself proves God's righteous rule, so the only fitting response is awe and praise.

Elihu, however, offers a more nuanced view of suffering. He claims that God uses suffering not to condemn but to help—to warn, to teach, to build character. It's an interesting idea, quite different from the harsh conclusions of Job's friends. Now, there are passages in the New Testament that tell us suffering can shape us—building perseverance and patience, and ultimately helping us grow in maturity and strength of faith (Romans 5:3–5; James 1:2–4).”

But Job isn't persuaded. In fact, he doesn't even respond. And with that silence, the entire dialogue section comes to an end. It's as if all the ancient wisdom has been exhausted, and the reason for suffering remains a mystery.

We also need to recognize that Job is on an emotional rollercoaster. He once believed firmly in God's justice, but he can't square that belief with his own experience. In his anguish, he sometimes lashes out. He accuses God of attacking him, tearing at him, even gnashing God's teeth at him. At one point, he claims God orchestrates all the injustice in the world. But even as he says it, he's terrified. Deep down, he still hopes God is truly just.

At this point, let's pause to point out something important. What makes the Job of the poetic section of the book so remarkable is his courage. He refuses to settle for easy answers or simple acceptance of God's will. He dares to ask the hard questions that traditional wisdom often avoided. If God truly rewards the good and punishes the wicked, as Job's three friends insist, then why does life seem to work the opposite way? Why do the wicked prosper while honest people struggle? (Job 21:7–17).

The Job we meet in these dialogues challenges any faith that says, “Don't worry—everything will turn out fine.” He's not cynical; he's wrestling with how a person of faith can truly know God in the midst of suffering. Most of Job's speeches turn around that question. He cries out about God's silence. He longs for a relationship based on fairness and justice. And so, after arguing with his friends, he grows frustrated. He finally gives up on them and takes his case straight to God. He wants his day in court, if you will.

And then, suddenly, God appears in a whirlwind and speaks. God takes Job on a sweeping tour of creation, asking question after question:

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? (Job 38:3-5)

God asks Job more questions than we have time for. But notice what God does *not* do. God never explains Job’s suffering. God doesn’t say it was a test, or punishment, or the work of demonic forces. Instead, God points to the vastness of the universe—its complexity, its wildness, its mystery—and declares divine freedom and power. In this view, simply searching for answers is seen as an affront to God’s majesty. *Don’t ask. Don’t question.* God’s overwhelming presence will crush anyone who does. God’s response to Job seems clear: there is no answer to suffering—so stop looking for one.

But Job wants an explanation. He expects God to reason with him. But God refuses. God is God. No one stands on equal ground with the Almighty.

Finally, Job responds. Humbled by God’s overwhelming presence, he confesses:

“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)

Job is saying, “I used to know about God only through what others told me. But now I’ve encountered God for myself. And because of that, I take back my accusations. I recognize the limits of my understanding. I sit in humility.”

It’s important to recognize that Job is not punished, rebuked, or condemned. Instead, he moves from demanding answers to **trusting God within the mystery**. This moment is **the turning point** of Job’s spiritual journey, not about guilt or shame, but about **perspective**, an awakening that leads to deeper trust, not silence through humiliation. And more importantly, after this, God **vindicates Job**, not his friends.

So the Book of Job—especially the poetic dialogues—does not answer why we suffer. Neither does God. Suffering remains a mystery. Instead, the book invites us to face the mystery of suffering—not to solve it, but to live honestly within it. Sometimes faith isn’t about finding answers; it’s about

staying in relationship with God when nothing makes sense. Job never lets go of God—even when he’s angry, even when he feels abandoned.

That’s real faith. Not blind acceptance, but trust that endures confusion and pain. Faith that says, “I don’t understand, but I won’t walk away.” The kind of faith that keeps praying, keeps listening, keeps hoping—even when God seems silent.

The Book of Job reads like a great psalm of lament. It moves from **sorrow** to **prayer** to **praise**. And from the heart of Job’s questions and doubts, something new is born—**trust**.

And that is the invitation for us today: to trust God even when there are no answers. It’s also an **invitation to ask God for help**. Just like the father who brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus. When Jesus said, “All things are possible for one who believes,” the father cried out, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

We may never fully understand why there is so much suffering in the world, but we can do something about it. We can ease the pain of others and offer hope. We can give to local charities or global relief efforts. We can volunteer to fight disease, reduce poverty and hunger, and stand against oppression—especially against the innocent. We can speak up for those facing injustice and indignity.

In other words, we should do what we can to make this world a better place for others and for ourselves. May it be so. Thanks be to God. Amen.