

The question of suffering and how it relates to God's goodness and sovereignty has been a sticking point for many people throughout the ages. But this is not just an intellectual objection put forward by sceptics, (if we're honest) this is something Christians struggle with. When suffering does come to us, inevitably the first question on our lips is: Why God?

The Bible never side-tracks this issue and in no place is it dealt more explicitly than in the book of Job. I am convinced that there is not a work of literature that looks at the topic of suffering with such intellectual credibility, emotional honesty and wise counsel than the book of Job.

But it's important to see that Job isn't written to give a pat answer to the philosopher's objection. This issue is far too complex to tie into a neat and tidy bow. As Christopher Ash states in his commentary on Job, "there are two types of questions when it comes to God's role in suffering – armchair questions and wheelchair questions". Job is written for the latter.

The book is about the man Job, a man who is filled with integrity and godliness. Yet God allows Satan to strike him with such immense suffering and anguish until literally everything is stripped away from him – his children are dead, his livestock killed, his business ruined, his health has been destroyed, his friends have forsaken him, his wife cannot stand him and his once popular reputation has been dragged into the dirt so that he is now despised and mocked.

The vast majority of the book is then taken up with a beautiful poetic dialogue Job has with his three friends, in which they give Job terrible words of counsel basically saying that his suffering is the result of some sin he has kept hidden. But Job knows he is innocent and time and time again in his speeches he wants to know one thing: Why? The frustrating thing about the book is that God never answers that question, and Job never finds out!

Rather the book draws our attention to perhaps a more important question to think about in suffering: Who? Who is this God that orders the world this way? It may not be our instinct to ask such a question but it is absolutely key. Because the answer to that question will radically determine how we view suffering and whether or not it is possible for some good to come out of it. So what do we learn about who God is from Job?

God is big and in control

This is a big thing in Job. Job knows throughout his dialogues, and his friends know, that ultimately the universe is governed by a sovereign creator God. Everything that happens, happens because he ordains it. So Job's complaint is to cry out to God and ask why he has allowed such torment to be inflicted upon him. He rightly states that if it were not God then who else? (9:24)

If God is not in control, then suffering is just a part of nature. And if it's really just natural then we would have no right to complain about it. This is why a default to a lack of belief in God in no way helps with the problem of suffering, if anything it makes it infinitely worse.

But Job knows there is a God mighty in power who governs all things. This God gives and he takes away (Job 1:21). And when God does speak to Job he doesn't explain to him why he has suffered rather he shows him the magnitude of his character and power. In our pain we can easily become very introspective. But the book of Job calls us to be aware that there is a bigger picture. It's the God who "laid the foundations of the earth whilst the morning stars sang together and the angels shouted for joy" (Job 38:4-7) that is sovereign over our lives. He is not distant and he is not small. The suffering we experience may seem random to us, but the book of Job shows us it's in the hands of a powerful God.

Whether we are treading on the heights of green pastures or deep down in death's dark valley Job reminds us of a fact we are apt to forget. God is still God. And although the pain may seem unbearable there is a solace to be found in taking our eyes off ourselves and placing them on the one who governs all things.

God is a mediator who is also a friend

That comfort comes for the Christian because we know that this mighty powerful God who is sovereign is also the close personal God that we can call friend. Time and time again as Job engages with his "friends" he has this intense longing for a better friend (Job 16:19-21), a mediator who will stand between him and God, someone who will speak to God on his behalf and in turn show God to him (Job 9:32-35, 16:19-21, 19:25-27, 31:35-37). It's clear that in order to do this, this mediator can be no mere man, but must indeed be God himself.

The storyline of the Bible makes it clear that Job's longing for a mediator is the longing for Jesus, the one mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5). Jesus is the one who has brought us to God, who intercedes on our behalf and who is the perfect revelation of God.

This is how we can know truly that the God who is in control of our pain is good.

There's something about the extremity of Job's suffering that seems almost too extreme for us to relate to. The reason for this is that the suffering of this innocent servant is there to point us forward to the greater suffering of the perfect innocent servant. The suffering of Job is a prophetic foreshadowing to help us see the extremity of Jesus' suffering. Jesus suffered to a level infinitely greater than Job and the reason he did so was so he could take rebels like you and me and make us friends. When we read Job, we read a sample of Christ's pain.

That makes all the difference to a suffering believer. This is huge! The God of the Bible is a God who himself has suffered to degrees we cannot possibly imagine. But it was out of that suffering and darkness that the greatest act of salvation that the world has ever seen was achieved. Do you see what this means? This means that although our pain may look senseless we can know that it need not be senseless. Here we have what Job longed for in his pain – a mediator and friend who can sympathise with all our sufferings and yet is powerful enough to cause good to arise out of it.

God has given us a future hope that cannot be changed

Finally we see in Job's speeches a longing he has for something beyond death. Job is dotted with resurrection hope. *"All the days of my hard service I will wait for my renewal to come... Surely you will count my steps but not keep track of my sin."* (Job 14:14-17). Job longs for a time when his sin will be removed, his body renewed and he will get to see God with his own eyes.

This is the hope for all who follow Jesus. And what stops this being a mere abstract desire is that we have a proof that it will happen. Proof that comes from Jesus Christ's own resurrection from the grave. Jesus removes our sin on the cross and rises three days later to prove that it is done, sin has been dealt with and we can know with confidence that when we die we will see our Redeemer face to face (Job 19:26-27).

One of the simple truths to grasp about the suffering of Job is that it ends. When you're in a pit of despair it's hard to see a way out. We can make our pain an end in and of itself. But suffering is a passing thing. There is a hope that is real and substantial and eternal. Job yearned for it with eyes of great faith. He knew that this God would not abandon him to a grave.

What greater reason do we, who live on the other side of Jesus' resurrection, have to know that truth?

There is a happy ending to the book of Job. Satan's accusations (Job 1:9-11, 2:5) are proved false (Job 42:7) and as such he is defeated and Job receives much greater blessings than he had before (Job 42:12). There is a happy ending for all who follow Christ. Satan, the one who brings such pain to the world, will be defeated and the suffering we experience now will not even be worth comparing to the glories that await us (Romans 8:18).

Conclusion

Sitting down with Job is difficult and draining to read sometimes. Because suffering is a difficult and draining experience. Reading this book will not give you a "get out of suffering" card that you can play when hardships come. It won't change your circumstance but it can sharpen your perspective so that you have a solid resource to endure through trials. Job's honesty and lamentations become a comfort as they reflect our pain and voice and what we may feel like saying to God.

But as we weep with Job it's always helpful to remember that Job is a small picture of the God who suffered. The God who laid the foundations of the earth had his hands stretched out over a cross of wood and nailed to it for the sins of humanity. But his suffering was temporal, his glory eternal. Suffering is painful, but it is a mere passing shadow, there is a high eternal beauty far beyond its reach that cannot be hid by it...and that is found in the person of Christ. The book of Job calls us to cling to him – the obedient suffering servant of God.