



**Temple Baptist Church**  
Wilmington, North Carolina  
Dr. Mark E. Gaskins, *Senior Pastor*  
The Lord's Day, September 3, 2017

[www.templebaptist.us](http://www.templebaptist.us)

© 2017

---

**Suffering and the Saints: Reframing the Issue**  
**Job 38:1-11**

Large-scale catastrophes like natural disasters or terrorist attacks can be overwhelming. Just look at Houston right now or think back to the aftermath of 9/11. But personal human suffering can be overwhelming, too.

Take, for instance, the woman in her early forties who suffered a massive stroke at age nineteen and is still largely paralyzed and limited in speech. Or the young woman whose joy with her new husband turned to grief as she was widowed three months after their wedding. Or the twelve-year-old boy who died after a three-year battle with a horrible cancer that racked his body with pain and so distorted his appearance that it was difficult even to look at him. Or the faithful Baptist minister who wasted away for seven years with dementia, and didn't die until his flesh literally began to decay from bedsores.

These are all people I've known, friends and church members and family. And they were all believers in Christ. And for each of them, there are many more that you or I have known with their own stories of suffering.

Last Sunday I started a series of sermons in which we're exploring together the theme of "Suffering and the Saints." We have to spend some time with Job, don't we?

***Job's story***

No doubt you've heard of the patience of Job. But that's not the whole story. Between his genuinely pious humility right after his loss and his final confession, restoration, and double blessing, Job experienced a gut-wrenching struggle over God's character and justice in relation to his suffering. Though he endured it, he was anything *but* patient. And I can understand why.

This book that bears his name describes Job as upright and blameless, a man who feared God and shunned evil. God had blessed him with seven sons and three daughters, 7000 sheep and 3000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen and 500 donkeys, and a large number of servants. He was a man most blessed by God.

Then all of a sudden, for no obvious reason, he lost it all. *Everything*. In a challenge in the heavenly council. It was a contest to see whether Job would serve God no matter what, or if he was just serving God because God had blessed him so lavishly and protected him so long.

One day, while all of Job's children are at their oldest brother's home, a messenger comes to Job and says, "The Sabeans have attacked, killed all your servants and taken all your oxen. I'm the only one who escaped to tell you."

That's just the beginning. While this messenger is still speaking, another runs up and reports, "The fire of God fell and burned up all the sheep and the servants. I'm the only one who escaped to tell you."

Then it gets worse. As the second messenger is still speaking, another one comes and says,

“The Chaldeans have stolen your camels and put your servants to the sword. I’m the only one who has escaped to tell you.”

And just when Job thinks things are as bad as they can get, still another messenger comes and says, “All your sons and daughters were together feasting and drinking wine in their oldest brother’s house. A mighty wind swept in from the desert and destroyed the house. All of your children, every one of them, are dead.”

Total devastation. All his possessions gone. All his servants but the four messengers killed. And the worst blow of all—*all ten* of his children, *all at once*, dead.

At first, Job’s reaction is incredible. He engages in customary ancient mourning rituals, tearing his robe and shaving his head. He falls to the ground and worships God, saying, “I had nothing when I was born, and I’ll take nothing with me when I die. The LORD gives and the LORD takes away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” In all this, he never charges God with any kind of wrongdoing.

Satan then argues that if Job loses his own health, he’ll fold and curse God. So God gives Satan permission to try; he just can’t kill him. In short order, Job is covered with sores from head to toe, sitting among the ashes, scraping the sores with a piece of broken pottery.

His wife can’t take it any longer. She says, “Curse God and die.” After all, it can’t get any worse, can it?

But in all this, Job *still* doesn’t sin in what he says.

And then it happens. Reality begins to set in. He begins to go over things in his mind. He’s been faithful and upright, yet God has let all this happen to him. Isn’t God supposed to protect him from all this? It’s simply too much to take, losing everything—ten children at one time, his health, and most of all, God’s blessing.

Job wishes he’d never been born (3:1-13; 10:18-19). At least three times, he wishes he could die (3:20-22; 6:8-10; 7:13-16). More than once he wishes God would simply leave him alone (7:16; 10:20). At other times he wishes for a fair, honest inquiry into his situation, a courtroom hearing, so to speak, with someone mediating between him and God (13:1-3; 16:18-22; 19:23-24).

But more than anything else, Job wants an encounter with God. In the midst of all his questions and complaints, his primary petition is for *God’s presence*.

And it’s precisely at this point that Job is most frustrated. On the one hand, God is all *too* present, seemingly as his enemy, like a devouring beast or an attacking warrior (16:7-14). He feels God’s hand heavy upon him (23:1) rather than bearing him up. Yet on the other hand, God seems to him at times to be unyielding, absent, even terrifying. Job feels that God is not present enough, because he knows that God is the only one who can ultimately help him and set things right for him. If only he could find God! If only he could go to God’s dwelling! Then he could lay out his case before God, and God would drop his case against Job. But God seemingly won’t hear him, won’t answer his call, and won’t be found by him (23:1-9). And this terrifies Job.

Early in the story, Job’s three friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—come to console him. At first, they simply weep with him for a week. Not one of them says anything, because they see the intensity of his suffering.

But then on the eighth day, as my teacher Dr. Donald Keyser so eloquently put it, “They opened their mouths and ruined everything.”

You see, Job’s friends are determined to help him figure out *why* this suffering has befallen him. After all, as they see it, if Job can figure out the why, he can fix it and his suffering will end.

Now Eliphaz is a firm believer in the doctrine of *retributive justice*—that people get what they deserve. If they’re righteous, they’re rewarded. If they sin, they’re punished. To him, it’s obvious that Job has committed some kind of sin since he’s experiencing such awful suffering. So he should bear up under his circumstances, while humbling himself before God in repentance.

When Job protests his innocence, Bildad accuses him of being full of hot air. God doesn’t pervert justice. If Job is innocent, his children must have sinned to cause all this tragedy. If he is indeed innocent, he should seek God, and God will rouse himself on Job’s behalf and restore him.

When Job responds by questioning God’s dealings and whether he could get fair treatment in a face-to-face confrontation with God, Zophar rebukes him and says that if God were to speak to him, he would know what his transgressions are. In fact, Zophar says, “Your sin is so great that God has even forgotten some of it!” In other words, Job really should be getting it worse than he is. But God’s ways are beyond our ways, and we can never really understand them.

No wonder he calls them **miserable comforters** (16:2)!

Elihu has been listening to the conversation. Finally, he can hold his tongue no longer, and offers his two cents’ worth. He’s younger than the others, but confident and sincere in his beliefs. Intent on defending God and God’s justice, he sums up his lengthy speech by saying:

**“The Almighty is beyond our reach  
and exalted in power;  
in his justice and great righteousness,  
he does not oppress.”** (37:23, NIV)

Job insists that he is innocent and that God is treating him unfairly. He asks for a face-to-face meeting with God to hash it all out. He takes an oath that he’s innocent, thus implying that God is obligated either to bring formal charges against him or to remove the punishments.

To this point, Job has asked all the questions. He has determined the ground on which they are to be addressed and defined the perspective from which they are to be answered. In doing so, as my Old Testament professor Sam Balentine put it, Job has set himself up as potentially God’s equal in the dialogue and has put God on trial.<sup>1</sup>

And then God *reframes the issue*, putting things in a totally different perspective for Job. Job has been wanting answers, but now the LORD God says to him out of the storm (38:1-2, NIV):

**“Who is this that darkens my counsel  
with words without knowledge?  
Brace yourself like a man;  
I will question you, and you shall answer me.”**

God has been most patient with Job. But now it’s time to remind Job who is the Creator and who is the creature. Job was making judgments about God, the Creator and ruler of the universe, about God’s character, justice, and purpose—all *without the sufficient knowledge* to do so.

So for almost *four* full chapters, *God asks the questions*. When the Creator begins by asking, **“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?”** (38:4), you know you’re in trouble! After question after question about creation, Job confesses his unworthiness and his lack of knowledge. Then God deals with his questions about his justice: **“Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?”** (40:8). The LORD is not harsh with Job. He is simply

reminding Job of who he is and who Job is in relation to him.

Job has wanted answers, and he has demanded them on his terms. But as another of my teachers, Wayne Stacey, put it, “Job asked God for answers; God gave Job *himself*.” He did so on his own terms, not on Job’s. And that was more than enough. God completely reframed the issue, putting it in a totally different light for Job.

### ***Our story***

What can we learn from Job’s story?

We can never escape the fact that we live in a fallen world filled with suffering. There’s no way to guarantee we’ll never experience suffering, even *undeserved* suffering. God has made us in such a way that when we suffer we’re almost compelled to ask *why*. He doesn’t rebuke our questions and they don’t threaten him. But wallowing in them only leads to bitterness.

Somehow we have to own and express our grief, anger, frustration, and bewilderment, but we can’t get *stuck* there. We can never figure it all out, because much of our suffering is shrouded in *mystery*. We may trace secondary causes, but sometimes it’s impossible to trace why it happened to *me*. Somehow we have to move beyond *why* to *what do I do now?*

The psalmist who penned Psalm 73 had a similar change of perspective as he struggled with bitterness when he saw the wicked prospering and the righteous (including himself) suffering.

He begins the psalm with an affirmation of God’s goodness to his people, then quickly adds that he almost lost his foothold in his struggle. He says that when he tried to understand it all, it was oppressive to him, and that in his struggle his grief and bitterness made him like a senseless, ignorant brute beast before God. But in the midst of worship at the sanctuary, God reframed the issue for him, reminding him of God’s ultimate justice and his unfailing and all-sufficient presence with him.

And then it dawned on the psalmist—whether in prosperity or suffering, *the real good is to be near God*. And it is in his divine Son Jesus Christ, who took on human flesh and came among us to suffer and die for our sins and rose to set us free that God has come to us and now through His Holy Spirit dwells in us.

And that, my brothers and sisters and friends, completely reframes the issue of our suffering!

†MEG

---

<sup>1</sup> My notes from Dr. Sam Balentine’s “Introduction to the Old Testament,” Spring 1986, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, were helpful in my interpretation of the book of Job.