

Bible Studies for Life Commentary

The Case for God's Love

Focal Passages:

Job 40:1-9; Romans 8:18-21,28-30

Background Passages:

Job 38:1–42:9; Romans 8:12-39

Lesson Outline:

We Don't Have the Full Picture (Job 40:1-9)

Evaluate Present Sufferings in Light of Eternity (Rom. 8:18-21)

Discover Good from Suffering (Rom. 8:28-30)

What This Lesson Is About:

This lesson is about trusting a loving God in a world of suffering and evil.

Why This Lesson Is Important:

Many people have struggled with the question, *If God is loving, why does He allow evil and suffering?* This lesson provides a biblical-theological framework for dealing with that question.

How This Lesson Can Impact Your Life:

This lesson can help you respond to those who question how a loving God can allow evil and suffering to exist.

Spiritual Preparation Through Personal Bible Study

I recall, with uncanny clarity, where I was in the kitchen, in which hand I was holding the phone, and where my wife was standing 11 years ago when Roger called to tell me that his wife, Shirley, and youngest daughter, Joy, had been in an accident. He said Joy likely would not survive, and that Shirley would be paralyzed. He was right on both counts.

Any of you reading this could have written a paragraph like the previous one. We have all experienced, or witnessed closely, life-wrecking events. Not only do such tragedies forever change us and the people we love, they also call into question one of the most basic tenets of our faith: that God is good and loving. The question of why a good and loving God allows suffering and evil is age-old, and an apologist must respond as we make our case for hope in God. Evil and suffering have caused the shipwreck of faith for many people, and prove to be a stubborn obstacle to people who want to believe.

With this issue we have an unfortunate conjunction of one of the greatest needs and often the poorest theology. Answers like, "God just needed another rose in His garden," or "God loved him more than you," or "You did something to deserve this," are common and only multiply the pain. We must do better than this! The Bible offers sound guidance as we wrestle with the thorny problem of trusting a loving God in a world of suffering

and evil.

We Don't Have the Full Picture (Job 40:1-9)

- ¹ The LORD answered Job:**
- ² Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him?
Let him who argues with God give an answer.**
- ³ Then Job answered the LORD:**
- ⁴ I am so insignificant. How can I answer You?
I place my hand over my mouth.**
- ⁵ I have spoken once, and I will not reply;
twice, but now I can add nothing.**
- ⁶ Then the LORD answered Job from the whirlwind:**
- ⁷ Get ready to answer Me like a man;
When I question you, you will inform Me.**
- ⁸ Would you really challenge My justice?
Would you declare Me guilty to justify yourself?**
- ⁹ Do you have an arm like God's?
Can you thunder with a voice like His?**

The Book of Job consists of the account of Job's losing nearly all of his worldly blessings, and then questioning why this happened. His "friends" give him a typical but inadequate answer: he must have done something to deserve it. Job's denials fell on deaf ears, and he became increasingly insistent and even irritated by the implication that sin led to his suffering. If God's justice was as the friends described it, meting out punishment for sin, then Job wanted an opportunity to plead his case before God (23:3-7) and even challenged God's justice (ch. 24).

God's answer to Job begins in chapter 38, and 40:1-2 culminates the first part of God's challenge to Job. God offered a long list of the wonders of His creation and repeatedly challenged Job to explain how these things happened. He then paused with the question, **"Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him?"** God invited **an answer**. Not surprisingly, Job admitted (40:3-5) he could not, for **"I am so insignificant."** Job opted instead for silence.

Job came to the same uncomfortable conclusion we must when confronting the problem of evil and suffering. We have limited understanding because of our finite knowledge. Job knew none of the answers to God's questions in the previous two chapters. We might respond today, however, that unlike Job we do know much about the geological forces God used to form the earth (38:4-7), the physics of light and darkness (vv. 19-21), and the biology behind the birth of mountain goats (39:1-2)! We certainly know a great deal more than Job, and in our enlightenment might object that we deserve answers to our questions of why a calamity has taken place.

But do we? Though our knowledge has multiplied exponentially, can we really begin to comprehend the vast interplay of physical laws, timing, human free will, and so forth that

combine to produce a particular event? Do we really comprehend the degree to which evil has distorted our world or the ways in which chaos sometimes sweeps us up in its terrible and, from our perspective, unpredictable path? Of course not. We are in the prickly predicament of demanding our freedom to choose, then expecting God to sanction every choice and even override the free will of others. At some point we must admit we simply cannot understand that complex equation by which God works out His providence while still respecting the freedom He gave His creation.

God's challenge to Job is one part, "I am not obligated to answer you." However, the reason is not that the question was bad, but simply that Job was not God. We do not **have an arm like God's**, that is, we do not have His omnipotence. The other part of God's response is that because of our inadequacy, the question is essentially pointless. The "why" questions are not necessarily bad; they simply do not ultimately provide what we are looking for.

Imagine a situation in which you ask God directly about the loss you experienced and, like Job, God answers you directly. Only this time, suppose God lays out the whole scheme. He explains precisely why. Would that answer restore your loved one? Would answering why lead you to acceptance? The answer is no. The wound remains. The loss is still ragged and painful. Sadness is not a result of not *knowing*—it is the result of *loss*, and no answer restores the loss.

When we look through the knothole of our pain, pain is all we see. If we focus on the *why* question we doom ourselves to a self-justifying mental loop of misery. However, when we accept the fact that we don't have the full picture, then we begin to realize in a new and fresh way that there is a larger picture in which God stands and consistently reveals Himself to be good and loving. This revelation of Himself is much more important than a technical explanation of all the variables that would "explain" an event of suffering and evil. The most important truth we glean from Job is that God can be trusted when we suffer.

We only arrive at this sublime truth through faith. As inconvenient and painful as it is, the truth of the matter is that if God protected us from all suffering, protected from all the consequences of our choices, made life for us as comfortable and safe as possible, then there would be no need for faith. Thankfully, God's grace pools in our wounds, and faith enables us to see His presence and trust in His healing.

The Book of Job is often mistakenly represented as the biblical answer to the problem of evil and suffering. Actually, it contains not an answer but an invitation. We can trust that our good and loving God is an artist who always includes us in the picture.

Evaluate Present Sufferings in Light of Eternity (Rom. 8:18-21)

¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation eagerly waits with anticipation for God's sons to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility—not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it—in the hope ²¹ that the

creation itself will also be set free from the bondage of corruption into the glorious freedom of God's children.

No character in the Bible, about whom we know anything in detail, lived a stress-free life. The greatest forefathers and prophets and apostles had ample experience with suffering. Their lives illustrate various aspects of the answer to how a loving God can allow evil and suffering to exist. Paul is a great example. Luke chronicled some of his sufferings in the Book of Acts, and Paul himself listed his challenges (see 2 Cor. 1:8; 4:7-12; 11:23-28). Tradition tells us he died on a Roman chopping block. He knew suffering first-hand.

Paul was as faithful a man as ever walked the earth, as close to Christ as any, author of nearly half the books in our New Testament. His suffering should disprove once and for all the notion that if we were somehow good enough or faithful enough then we would live a pain-free life. How did Paul deal with this? Part of his answer was to look to eternity.

Paul found a tremendous imbalance between **the sufferings of this present time** and **the glory that is going to be revealed to us**. The phrase **to us** could be translated as *in us*. The difference is slight but potentially very important. Just as we experience within us the pain of suffering we will experience within us the glory of God's redemption in eternity. We will not merely be witnesses to this glory, but participants in and heirs to it.

We normally view the imbalance in a different way—like Job, the person who died or got sick did not deserve it. You did not deserve it! The degree of suffering is entirely out of proportion to any potential justification.

Part of Paul's answer was to connect our suffering to the corruption of **creation**. Sin had a universal impact not just on human beings, but on creation itself, which has been **subjected to futility**. (See this lesson's Word Study on "futility.") We have plenty of examples of how our poor stewardship has damaged our world. While Paul might not have had a 21st century environmentalist's eye for this problem, his diagnosis does fit the disease. Human beings along with all of creation long for redemption.

We should note at this point that the Bible does not present evil and suffering as a part of God's original creation. Genesis 3:17-18 tells us quite clearly that Adam and Eve's sin was the cause of the corruption of society and nature. Jesus, in His parable of the wheat and weeds (Matt. 13:24-30), made clear that the weeds were the work of the enemy (vv. 25,28). Laying blame for suffering and evil on God is neither accurate, fair, nor helpful. It is another example of demanding our freedom and then blaming God for the results. We live in a broken world, and the brokenness extends in ever-expanding circles of destruction from that first manifestation of humanity's insistence on its own will.

The effect of this insight on the issue of evil and suffering is two-fold. First, we do not blame God for this mess. He is not the author of evil, He is the solution. The Bible, in fact, from the fall onward is the story of God's "putting back together" what we have broken. Ultimately He acted in Jesus Christ, and from the cross onward the victory is won.

Second, at some point in the future **creation itself will also be set free from the bondage of corruption.** The Bible expresses this as a new heaven and new earth (see Isa. 65:17; 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:13; and Rev. 21:1). This universal redemption means that all will be made right; creation along with all of **God’s children** will experience this **glorious freedom.**

The assurance of this promising future means that Christians have a powerful hope. Though evil and suffering are so very strong right now, ultimately God prevails. Embracing this hope is a very potent testimony to other people. This study Unit is entitled “The Case for Hope.” You will never make a more compelling case for hope than when the temporal evidence looks rather dim. Our focus, therefore, as Christians should be on eternal things.

Christians are open to the charge here that our future orientation amounts to denial and is nothing more than wishful thinking. The evidence does not support this accusation, however. The light of eternity enables us to both survive a terrible loss and to engage in relieving suffering and evil in the present. In two recent articles, prominent atheists admitted that Christians are the first and most effective responders to natural tragedies, and that our convictions about God and eternity lead to a more engaged life, not less so.¹

The bottom line: eternity is relevant and helps us to make sense of suffering and evil. It may seem little comfort to accept the fact that a loved one continues to live in heaven. Our faith does not require us to consider every funeral as a celebration of a “homegoing.” As a teenager who lost his father suddenly to a heart attack told me, “death stinks.” He was right in the sense that it is not a part of God’s original plan and it hurts. We cannot and should not deny that pain. But the hope we have that extends into eternity certainly enables us to strongly make the case for hope.

Discover Good from Suffering (Rom. 8:28-30)

²⁸ We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God: those who are called according to His purpose. ²⁹ For those He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those He predestined, He also called; and those He called, He also justified; and those He justified, He also glorified.

Limited knowledge (the first outline point) and the promise of eternity (the second) are important aspects to the question of evil and suffering. The study passage for this outline point helps us focus on how suffering is potentially a transforming process, not simply a passive experience to endure. It helps answer the question of what God is doing when we face suffering. Paul assured us we are not alone in our suffering and actually have assurance God is working in spite of the difficulties we face.

God’s providence, the fact that He works out His will and purpose in our lives and in the world, extends to **all things.** God’s universal activity is important because it means though He does permit suffering, He does not allow it to prevent His active love in our lives. In fact, rather than making us weaker, God actually works in all things **for the**

good. We should observe that Paul did not make God the *author* of evil and suffering, but rather assured us that His providence is stronger than our pain. No matter what degree of difficulty we face, we can know that God can work it out for good in our lives. To call every situation or thing “good” would be ludicrous and an affront to moral thinking, but to trust that God does not allow evil to have the last word or effect is a powerful response on our part to suffering.

We must also notice the extent of God’s providence extends to **those who love God**, and **those who are called according to His purpose.** These two phrases describe Christians. In order to experience God’s transforming grace we do need to stay close to Him in mutual relationship. The temptation is strong sometimes to run away from God when life is hard, but does that really make sense? We cannot expect any good to come into our lives if we distance ourselves from the very Author of good. A sensitive apologist will be careful to help a suffering person understand that there is nothing “good” about a tragic situation, and no one should be expected to reach a point in life when they say that a tragedy was a good thing. What is good is what God can bring out of the tragedy.

The Bible provides countless examples of this transformational grace. Joseph was severely mistreated by his brothers, but at the end of that long journey was able to affirm God brought good out of all the evil he experienced (Gen. 50:20). In the same way, Paul often expressed deeper understanding of God through the assurance of His presence in suffering. For example, he learned to rely on God when circumstances in life became difficult (2 Cor. 1:7-10). He learned about the sufficiency of grace when faced with a thorn in the flesh (12:7-9). The supreme example is God’s transforming the cross, the cruel Roman execution device, into the means of our salvation. The pattern of Easter following Good Friday illustrates the principle of this section.

This passage contains several “heavy” theological terms that require some brief description. Christians of sound faith and mind disagree on many of the nuances. The term **foreknew** refers to God’s omniscience and assures us that nothing surprises God. He planned for and knew ahead of time about our salvation. The term does not imply fate, nor does it negate our choice to receive God’s free gift of salvation. The same principle applies to **called.** God’s call extends universally to all people, and it is His will that all come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9), but only those who respond to Him are *the called.*

Most often the thorniest of the terms is **predestined**, but it need not be. The root verb is *horizo*, from which we get the English word horizon. The term describes a preset horizon, dividing line, or boundary. The boundary is faith in Christ, and all who have crossed that line are in Christ, and God **predestined** that they **be conformed to the image of His Son.** This phrase moves to glorification and describes our ultimate future state. In verse 30, Paul summarized a process God takes us through that includes being **justified** (put in a right standing before God), then **glorified** (becoming more and more like Jesus).

We must not lose sight of Paul’s primary purpose in this passage. He was not specifically dealing with how a person becomes a Christian, but emphasized that God is at work in Christians’ lives to accomplish **good** in spite of evil. Nothing we face here will prevent God’s glorifying us in this life and into eternity. A Christian’s effective and faithful response to suffering is one sign of God’s present glorification *in process* and serves to draw other people to Him.

No trite answers for the questions of evil and suffering sufficed for Roger, and they shouldn't for anyone. While people will quibble about our explanations and answers we do need to know how to respond to this question. A tragedy seldom leaves a person neutral. It will either make them better or bitter, and it is an opportunity. In the end, however, a changed and faithful life is our best response.

I have watched my friend wrestle with the topic of this lesson for 11 years. At times he is still nearly overwhelmed, but less and less so over the years. What remains and what has deepened is the conviction with which Paul ended Romans 8, that nothing can separate us from God's love (vv. 37-39). As Roger puts it, "I have been to the bottom. God is there."

Biblical Truths of This Lesson in Focus

- God has a perspective on evil and suffering that we simply cannot comprehend because of our finite knowledge.
- While God does not offer an explanation of suffering and evil, He does reveal Himself and invite us to have faith that He is good and loving.
- Though the believer's present pain may be intense, his or her future glory is assured.
- God's providence is more powerful than any trouble we face, and He works to bring good out of bad situations.

Word Study: *Futility* (Rom. 8:20; "vanity," KJV)

This word denotes uselessness or emptiness, and Paul used it to describe the corruption of creation. It specifically describes the state of creation as the result of sin. Because of sin, nothing is as it should be or as God originally created it. In this way, Paul has demonstrated that the effects of sin extend to the Gentile (Rom. 1:18-32), the Jew (2:1-11), and even to creation itself. Because of this universal effect of sin, Christians and heaven and earth eagerly anticipate complete redemption at the return of Christ.

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1. Matthew Parris, "As an atheist, I truly believe Africa needs God," *TimesOnline* [online], 27 December 2008 [accessed 29 September 2009]. Available from the Internet: www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/matthew_parris/article5400568.ece#at. Roy Hattersley, "Faith does breed charity," *Guardian* [online], 12 September 2005 [accessed 29 September 2009]. Available from the Internet: www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/sep/12/religion.uk.