

Why God's Chosen People Suffer

The Book of Job

God's Response to Job: The Foundation for Gratitude in the Midst of Suffering

Job 38 – 42

Introduction: I'm Involved, Too!

This morning, we begin straddle Thanksgiving which is of course about gratitude, and Christmas since Advent begins today. Christmas is about the birth of Jesus and the beginning of his physical suffering with us. So this message is going to straddle both themes. We're going to talk about gratitude in the midst of suffering. We do suffer many things. As I thought of us, here are some questions I thought some of us might be asking: Why don't we have more money? Why do I still live here? Why do other people stress me out so much? Why don't I get more privileges? Why am I not recognized? Why am I still single? Why do I or someone I love have that sickness? Why am I still in this conflict? Why am I in pain? I'm sure there are more questions like that, which make it hard to be grateful. I'm going to explore the Book of Job, and explore God's response to Job in the midst of his suffering. What is it about God's response that led Job to gratitude?

Let me introduce our time with a story. Years ago, when my younger sister Mari and I were both home for Christmas (I think) in Los Angeles, I watched my sister and my mom get into a fight. Just to give you a sense for how old we were: My sister was still in college, and I had been working for a few years. The circumstances were: My sister and my mom were arguing about something about their relationship. Their relationship had been fairly rocky ever since my sister started 9th grade. At times, it caused them so much pain there would be days when they wouldn't really speak to each other. There was the normal growing up pains. Then there was the 1st to 2nd generation 'you don't understand me' pain. Then there was the 'opposite personality type' pain. And on top of that, there was the 'mom and dad recently went through a divorce' pain. So, there was a lot of pain. I had very much been in the middle of this for about 6 years at that point. My mom would complain to me about my sister, and then my sister would complain to me about our mom. And I would just encourage them both to hang in there, try to keep talking, and so on. Well, this one night during Christmas break, I listened to them fight again. Sometime afterwards, I went to talk to my sister in her room. I know I caught her in a moment of frustration because at one point, she wound up saying, 'You have no idea what it's like to live here!' Up until that point, I was calm and sympathetic. And I still was, but that's what made me challenge her with very pointed questions. I said, 'Didn't I grow up here, too? Didn't I struggle to relate to mom, too? Haven't I listened to both of you this whole time? Haven't I been involved?'

That is essentially God's response to His people when we ask certain questions when we suffer certain things. 'Don't I understand? Haven't I been involved? Am I not also affected?' Job does not tell us everything about God's response to us in our suffering, so I'm going to go beyond Job in some ways. The book of Job is not even about all suffering, really. But it is one piece of the overall picture. In Job, God tells Job that He is deeply involved in Job's suffering and cares deeply for Job. Let's look at how.

Job, the Person

The Book of Job begins with a description of the man, Job:

^{1:1} There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job; and that man was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil. ² Seven sons and three daughters were born to him. ³ His possessions also were 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 female donkeys, and very many servants; and that man was the greatest of all the men of the east. ⁴ His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. ⁵ When the days of feasting had completed their cycle, Job would send and consecrate them, rising up early in the morning and offering burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, "Perhaps my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually.

This portrait of Job is very important. The reason why Satan singles out Job in the very next section is because of what kind of person Job is. In v.1, Job 'was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil.' And in v.5, 'Job would send and consecrate them, rising up early in the morning and offering burnt offerings according to the number of them all.' In other words, Job had a deep sense of integrity, a deep devotion to God, and a deep desire to bless other people. He prayed continually for his family, and in other parts of the book we learn that Job

cared about other people as well. So Job is choosing to let God use him to bless the world around him. That is why Satan singles Job out. Job does not represent 'every person.' His suffering is not what 'every person' suffers. Job specifically represents God's people.

Why does Satan attack Job? God's invites people to partner with Him to bless the world, and Satan wants to stop the human partners God works through. Satan wants to stop God's blessing from flowing from God to the world. That is why *Israel's* history was one of suffering. That is why *Jesus'* life was filled with suffering. That is why *true Christians* suffer in a unique way for their faith. Paul writes in Colossians 1:24, 'Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of his body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.' That is why Job specifically represents the people of the biblical God. He does not represent 'every person.' Satan does not have the calories to burn to attack 'every person.' He is only interested in attacking 'God's people.' So the 'Satanic attack' aspect of Job's story is pertinent to God's people. God's response, though, doesn't focus at all on Satan. God ignores Satan. In that sense, God's response to Job is pertinent to all people. That's the section I'm going to focus on.

So Job lost his livestock and his children. He got boils on his skin from head to toe. His wife, in her own pain, said, 'Curse God and die.' But Job refused. He even said, 'The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away' (Job 1:21) and 'Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?' (Job 2:10). But those statements will be *corrected* by the end of the book, not affirmed. So Job cursed the day he was born. He demanded an answer from God. Then his friends said that he must have sinned to deserve such suffering. They thought faith and good behavior leads to a nice, comfortable life. Since Job was not having a comfortable life, they thought he must have sinned somewhere. Job argued with them. He said, 'Look, I haven't sinned.' This is an important point in the book of Job: God is not mechanical. God is not one gigantic payback system. So Job said, 'I have heard many such things; sorry comforters are you all. Is there no limit to windy words? Or what plagues you that you answer?' (Job 16:1 – 2) This is why the phrase 'Job's comforters' refers to people who try to console you, but wind up throwing salt in your wounds.

God's Response to Job: 38:1 – 41:34

After a few rounds of back and forth debate between Job and his friends, a storm appears, and God speaks through the storm. After the storm, Job says, 'Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know...I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You; therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes' (Job 42:3 – 6). What God said to Job in chapters 38 – 41 is supposed to be the answer that changes Job's mind. So the moral of the story is whatever God said there. That's the climax, the punchline, the lesson. The issue of his suffering was personally resolved by God. So what did God say?

- ^{38:1} Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said,
- ² Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
- ³ Now gird up your loins like a man, And I will ask you, and you instruct Me!
- ⁴ Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding,
- ⁵ Who set its measurements? Since you know. Or who stretched the line on it?
- ⁶ On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone,
- ⁷ When the morning stars sang together And all the sons of God shouted for joy?

Is God bullying Job into silence? Is He saying, 'Hey, I'm more powerful than you, so just shut up'? This is one reason why we might be uncomfortable with the Book of Job. I don't think that's what God was doing, so I'll come back to that later. Let's dissect God's opening statement. The first thing to notice is that God repeats things that Job said before. Job in chapter 3, cursed the day he was born and said,

- ^{3:3} Let the day perish on which I was to be born, And the night which said, 'A boy is conceived.'
- ⁴ May that day be darkness; Let not God above care for it, Nor light shine on it.
- ⁵ Let darkness and black gloom claim it; Let a cloud settle on it; Let the blackness of the day terrify it.
- ⁶ As for that night, let darkness seize it; Let it not rejoice among the days of the year; Let it not come into the number of the months.
- ⁷ Behold, let that night be barren; Let no joyful shout enter it.
- ⁸ Let those curse it who curse the day, Who are prepared to rouse Leviathan [the crocodile].
- ⁹ Let the stars of its twilight be darkened; Let it wait for light but have none, And let it not see the breaking dawn;

How like me this is. My laptop crashed last summer, and I just wanted the world to end. I crawled into my bed and under my covers and wished for the world to end. Job wanted total darkness to overtake the whole world because of his own suffering. He wanted not just his life, but the world to stop, and to end in darkness. God tells Job that it's Job's perspective that is full of darkness. 'Who is this that darkens counsel...?' He reminds Job that the world is not made for total darkness, but for light:

³ Now gird up your loins like a man, And I will ask you, and you instruct Me!
⁴ Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding,
⁵ Who set its measurements? Since you know. Or who stretched the line on it?
⁶ On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone,
⁷ When the morning stars sang together And all the sons of God shouted for joy?
¹² Have you ever in your life commanded the morning, And caused the dawn to know its place,
¹³ That it might take hold of the ends of the earth, And the wicked be shaken out of it?
¹⁴ It is changed like clay under the seal; And they stand forth like a garment.
¹⁵ From the wicked their light is withheld, And the uplifted arm is broken.
¹⁶ Have you entered into the springs of the sea Or walked in the recesses of the deep?
¹⁷ Have the gates of death been revealed to you, Or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?
¹⁸ Have you understood the expanse of the earth? Tell Me, if you know all this.
¹⁹ Where is the way to the dwelling of light? And darkness, where is its place,
²⁰ That you may take it to its territory And that you may discern the paths to its home?
²¹ You know, for you were born then, And the number of your days is great!

The day is lit by the sun. Even the night is lit by the stars and the moon. Even night creatures need the light of the stars and moon. Total darkness is something that God rejects completely. Why? Because God is on the side of life, completely, and life needs light.¹

Then God reinforces the sense that He is on the side of life by pointing out that He provides water, to water the land:

^{38:8} Or who enclosed the sea with doors When, bursting forth, it went out from the womb;
⁹ When I made a cloud its garment And thick darkness its swaddling band,
¹⁰ And I placed boundaries on it And set a bolt and doors,
¹¹ And I said, 'Thus far you shall come, but no farther; And here shall your proud waves stop'?...
²² Have you entered the storehouses of the snow, Or have you seen the storehouses of the hail,
²³ Which I have reserved for the time of distress, For the day of war and battle?
²⁴ Where is the way that the light is divided, Or the east wind scattered on the earth?
²⁵ Who has cleft a channel for the flood, Or a way for the thunderbolt,
²⁶ To bring rain on a land without people, On a desert without a man in it,
²⁷ To satisfy the waste and desolate land And to make the seeds of grass to sprout?

God uses words that indicate that He cares for all creation like a father. The sea 'went out from the womb' (38:8) because God gave birth to it. God put a 'swaddling band' on the clouds as if the clouds were His little baby. Then God asks:

²⁸ Has the rain a *father*? Or who has *begotten* the drops of dew?
²⁹ From whose *womb* has come the ice? And the frost of heaven, who has given it *birth*?
³⁰ Water becomes hard like stone, And the surface of the deep is imprisoned.

God gives water its limits so that it does not overtake the land. That's how life hangs in the balance. Then God speaks of personally leading the stars and the clouds, as if they were small children, to help them do what He intended them to do:

³¹ Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, Or loose the cords of Orion?
³² Can you lead forth a constellation in its season, And guide the Bear with her satellites?
³³ Do you know the ordinances of the heavens, Or fix their rule over the earth?

¹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1985), ch.4; see especially p.96 – 97, 'At the very beginning of the poetic argument, we entered the world of Job's inner torment through the great death-wish poem that takes up all of Chapter 3. These first thirty-seven lines of God's response to Job constitute a brilliantly pointed reversal, in structure, image, and theme, of that initial poem of Job's... This general turning of Job's first affirmation of death into an affirmation of life is minutely worked out in the language and imagery of the poem that God speaks.'

- ³⁴ Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, So that an abundance of water will cover you?
³⁵ Can you send forth lightnings that they may go And say to you, 'Here we are'?
³⁶ Who has put wisdom in the innermost being Or given understanding to the mind?
³⁷ Who can count the clouds by wisdom, Or tip the water jars of the heavens,

Again, why does God say these things? It's because Job said similar things about God. But now God is correcting Job.

- ^{9:5} It is God who *removes the mountains*, they know not how, When He *overturns* them in His anger;
⁶ Who *shakes the earth out of its place*, And its *pillars tremble*;
⁷ Who commands the sun *not to shine*, And sets a seal upon the stars;
⁸ Who alone stretches out the heavens And tramples down the waves of the sea;
⁹ Who *makes* the Bear, Orion and the Pleiades, And the chambers of the south;

Job by his language shows that he thinks God is arbitrary and distant. Does God remove mountains? No: God does not say that He *removes* mountains. Does He destabilize the earth, shaking it? I don't think that is the same thing as earthquakes, which are actually necessary for life on earth, because life needs an active core and plate tectonics. So, no: God does not shake the earth and cause pillars to tremble. He *establishes foundations*. Does God command the sun *not to shine*? No: That would be against God's nature and against the nature He gave the sun. God commands the sun *to shine*. And the other statements are half-truths. Did God make the constellations? Yes: You could say that God *made* the constellations, but God says He *leads* the stars. God is stressing His order and intimacy, His personal care and involvement; Job is missing that somehow.

But that's not all that God is correcting in Job. Job in his first speech said that he wished death would take him.

- ^{3:10} Because it did not shut the opening of my mother's womb, Or hide trouble from my eyes.
¹¹ Why did I not die at birth, Come forth from the womb and expire?
¹² Why did the knees receive me, And why the breasts, that I should suck?

Then Job said death itself was 'rest,' 'ease,' and 'freedom':

- ^{3:13} For now I would have lain down and been quiet; I would have slept then, I would have been at *rest*,
¹⁴ With kings and with counselors of the earth, Who rebuilt ruins for themselves;
¹⁵ Or with princes who had gold, Who were filling their houses with silver.
¹⁶ Or like a miscarriage which is discarded, I would not be, As infants that never saw light.
¹⁷ There the wicked cease from raging, And there the weary are at *rest*.
¹⁸ The prisoners are at *ease* together; They do not hear the voice of the taskmaster.
¹⁹ The small and the great are there, And the slave is *free* from his master.

But is death really rest, ease, and freedom? No, it is not. Death is something else entirely. Again, God is on the side of life, and Job has gone too far. Job has idealized death and made it an escape. God does not see death that way. So God shows how He is personally involved in giving life:

- ^{38:39} Can you hunt the prey for the lion, Or satisfy the appetite of the young lions,
⁴⁰ When they crouch in their dens And lie in wait in their lair?
⁴¹ Who prepares for the raven its nourishment When its young cry to God And wander about without food?
^{39:1} Do you know the time the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the calving of the deer?
² Can you count the months they fulfill, Or do you know the time they give birth?
³ They kneel down, they bring forth their young, They get rid of their labor pains.
⁴ Their offspring become strong, they grow up in the open field; They leave and do not return to them.
⁵ Who sent out the wild donkey free? And who loosed the bonds of the swift donkey...

What kind of response is this? Let's think about all the other ways God could have responded to Job. (1) He could have said, 'Job, this is for your sin in the past, so this is fair.' Clearly, God does not even imply that. (2) Or God could have said, 'Job, this is for a reward in the future, and I will make this fair in the end.' But He doesn't say that. God never says that our circumstances are fair. God is loving. But it does not mean that our circumstances will be fair. (3) Or, God could have pointed the finger at someone else. If God is innocent in all this, then why doesn't He say to Job, 'Look it's not Me, alright? I didn't do this to you. It was Satan. And how did he wind up having so much leeway in the world? Adam and Eve let him. So don't blame Me, okay???' Why doesn't God say that?

Maybe because that would make God defensive, and God is not defensive. Maybe because if God were to point fingers, He would become an Accuser? And there is already one Accuser: Satan. God doesn't need to become an Accuser Himself.

God is saying, 'I am involved in *life*. I am *personally* involved in every single life. I give the animals their food. I know when they give birth to their young. I help in the delivery. I am the midwife to every birth. I care. I help when they are growing up because I care and I am personally involved. You think that death is what sets people free. I set the wild donkey and all the animals free. Death is tyranny and enslavement.'

But what about all the other things that God does not talk about? What about miscarriages, birth defects, and diseases? What about the violence we see in our streets? What about earthquakes and tsunamis? What about death? Is God just ignoring all that? No, God is not ignoring that. By responding this way, God is saying, 'My purposes for creation in general is life. As a whole system, life flourishes here because it grows and some parts of creation give their life so that other parts of the creation can have life. And My purposes for human life are special even above and beyond that.'

[I'm aware that God says to Satan, 'You incited Me against him to ruin him without cause' in Job 2:3 after the first round of Job's suffering. This sounds like God was personally 'against' Job, smiting Job with the death of his children and loss of livestock. But from the context of the exchange between God and Satan, I think this was simply God's way of saying that He allowed Satan to attack Job. Implicitly, 'You incited Me against him to ruin him without cause *by allowing you, Satan, to attack him.*' Moreover, I believe that the dialogue between God and Satan is a rhetorical device; in reality, Satan is a free agent and does not need God's explicit permission to do anything, especially interfere with God's love for humanity. The dialogue is a way of conceptualizing the opposition between Satan and God. Why then does Job get attacked by Satan? And why does God 'permit' this? Many theologians speak of God's 'permissive will' which is distinct from His 'active will' or 'moral will'? In this case, God apparently 'permits' Satan to attack Job. However, I prefer not to speak of God's 'permissive will' in this case. Instead, I believe that God – because of His own character of love – *had* to act to redeem the world through human partners, and therefore *had* to expose those human partners to Satan's attacks, because those attacks are really directed at God Himself. The invitation to partner with God is His *active* will, not His 'permissive will.' Satan's attacks are not 'permitted' by God as if He could have it be otherwise, and yet chooses not to do so. Those attacks are unavoidable and simply result from God's selection of human partners to bless the world. They also result from a certain love God must have for Satan, as well, and His continual call to Satan to desist and repent, which Satan refuses. Thus Job, in suffering at the hands of Satan, was a representation of Israel, Jesus, and the church. Once again, Job is not 'every person,' so we cannot say that God exposes every person to Satan's attacks in this way. I've explored the roles of Job and Israel in *Suffering and the Roles of Job, Israel, and Jesus* found at my website, www.anastasiscenter.org/bible-writings.]

So if God is the one who gives life to human beings, and only life, then what is it that He can really do about human suffering and death?

Illus: Here I have a glass full of water, and a pitcher full of water. Let's say for the sake of analogy that this glass is Adam or Eve. The pitcher represents God. God has made people and filled Adam and Eve up half way with clear, fresh water. And God gave them a choice about whether they were going to ask Him to fill them up completely with Himself. But they chose to take this green stuff [green food coloring], and take it inside herself and himself. Now, by itself, the green stuff had a purpose, and it was good, too, in its own way. It may have been useful as ink, as something to write reminders with. Or paint or dye, something to color with. But it was not meant to be eaten. It was not meant to be in us. Every child of Adam and Eve has this infection of green stuff in us. The whole world is now messed up because we do things like this. Now God would like to return people back to the way He intended for us. He would like to return the world back to the way He intended it to be. So in the person of Jesus, He has come and He has taken on this liquid with the green stuff inside. And Jesus received and received from the Father the clear, fresh water of the Spirit, and did this. [Pour fresh water into the glass until it overflows, and the water inside the glass becomes completely clear.] Amazing, right?! The role of God in this simple illustration is to overflow with clear, fresh water. It's not as if He secretly messed the world up. He did not put the green stuff into us. We did, and we misused the world. God cannot do anything except give us clear, fresh water. He only does that. The role of the glass is to receive that water voluntarily, and then do other things with it on behalf of the world and on behalf of God. That is what I think God is talking about with Job. God is offering life, and only life. He is

drawing Job to Himself, and only doing that. Yes, He is purging away Job's mistaken ways of thinking. But He is doing that to draw Job to Himself so He could pour Himself into Job again.

Illus: When we feel God expanding our hearts, those are the moments when we become aware that He wants to pour more of Himself into us. For me, one of the earliest moments of this was my sophomore year in college. It was 1992, and two major events happened that really affected me. The first was the U.S. federal government finally gave reparations checks to every survivor of the Japanese American internment. My dad, his sisters, and his mom all got checks. That stirred up a lot of feelings in me. The second was that the Rodney King incident happened in Los Angeles. White police officers beat a black man, Rodney King. Then L.A. erupted in violence. Since I'm from L.A., I was really disturbed. I remember laying awake at night listening to talk radio shows during this whole time. In the face of these major systemic injustices, I prayed for people, and I felt God say, 'Why don't we do something about this together, you and I?' I was terrified, but you can't ignore God forever. I felt God pouring Himself into me – His grief, His love, His compassion, His desire for social justice. And that launched me on a journey that I'm still on. I've met many people who have had moments like that. Many of you have had moments like that. God calls our attention to ways He is expanding our hearts by pouring Himself into us. That is how He is healing and transforming us, and healing and transforming the world.

Why Was Job Silenced?

Job was written long before Jesus, so Job doesn't see all the way to Jesus. But what He does hear about God convinces Job. It satisfies him. Later he says:

^{40:3} Then Job answered the LORD and said,

⁴ 'Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? I lay my hand on my mouth.

⁵ Once I have spoken, and I will not answer; Even twice, and I will add nothing more...'

^{42:2} 'I know that You can do all things, And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.

³ 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' 'Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.'

Some people read the book of Job and think that God bullies Job into shutting up. It's as if God was saying, 'I'm all powerful. I do whatever I want. So what are you going to say to that? Why don't you just shut up, Job?' If that were the case, then God would be a big bully, and there would be no difference between him and a mafia leader who says, 'Look, I'm the boss, alright? I'm going to make you a deal-uh you can't-uh refuse-uh. Why don't you shut your mouth-uh?' Wow, what kind of god would that be??

But that's not at all what God is saying. God is saying, 'I'm all loving. I am on the side of life, 100%. I provide the context for life. I lay down the conditions for life. I count every drop of rain and every blade of grass. I help bring life into being. I care about every single birth. I'm invested in every single birth. I'm affected by what happens to every single life. I'm involved.' That is why Job eventually falls silent. He is satisfied with the love of God. God does not *bully* Job into silence. God *wins* Job into silence.² And then God wins Job back into *partnership*. In the

² Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), ch.9; see especially p.187, 'From the beginning of creation, then, and from the outset of God's conversation with Job, God is portrayed as a parent... The sea is created by coming forth from a womb, and God deals with the sea as a mother deals with her child: he wraps it in swaddling bands; he clothes it with a garment... God controls the sea by talking to it. In fact, it is hard to see these lines as a description of a subjugation. God does not bend the sea to his will... [Instead] God addresses the sea directly, in second-person forms of speech. In fact, God talks to the sea as if the sea were a rambunctious and exuberant child of his, but nonetheless a child who can hear him, understand him, and respond to him... Darkness and light have dwelling places, and God gets them to those places by personal interaction with them. He does not issue an impersonal decree stipulating where darkness and light must be. Rather, he himself guides them there... And when God sends the lightning where it should go, the lightning responds by talking to God... In that next part, what God tells Job shows not only God's power over the animals and his knowledge of their nature and ways... but it also makes clear God's great care for the animals and his second-personal connections to them... For example, the raven's young do not just cry when they are hungry; they cry to God (Job 38:41). Young and helpless animals are described as having a personal relationship with God – and so are powerful, fully grown animals (Job 39:9 – 11)... It is a mistake, then, to characterize God's speeches to Job as demonstrating nothing but God's power over creation. The speeches certainly do show God's power; but, equally importantly, they show God in second-personal connection to all his creatures... God deals as a parent with his creatures, from the sea and rain to the raven and the donkey and even the monstrous behemoth and leviathan. He brings them out of the womb, swaddles, feeds, and guides them, and even plays with them. Most importantly, he talks to them; and somehow, in some sense or other, they talk to him in return. These speeches thus show God as more than powerful. They show him as engaged in second-person experience, as it were, with his whole creation, and they portray him as having a parental care towards all his creatures, even the inanimate ones.' See also Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, p.99 – 103 and his excellent discussion of 'birth' language in God's speech in Job.

last chapter of Job, God blesses Job again, and asks Job to pray for those sorry friends (Job 42:7 – 10). Job does. God and Job are back in business together, and God gives Job more life (42:11 – 17).

Illus: When my sister and I had our conversation years ago, I understood that she was frustrated. But her accusation, ‘You have no idea what it’s like to live here!’ went too far. Really? Didn’t I grow up here, too? Haven’t I been involved? My sister realized what she had done, and we sat in silence for a while together. Then, we partnered together again on how we could bring handle the conflict with our mom. When we suffer, sometimes we tend to push away the very people and the very God who can help us. This was what Job was doing. God wins Job back into partnership. He desires to continually win you and me into partnership with Himself.

Conclusion

Let’s summarize God’s response. How can we be grateful in the midst of suffering? Let me give three points to remember. First, God is not behind your suffering. Second, God suffers with you. Third, God is ahead of you in your suffering, in resurrection. What do I mean?

First, God is not behind your suffering. He is not the cause. We can be grateful for that. In God’s response to Job, God is not just highlighting the nice things He does. He’s highlighting the only thing He does. He says, ‘I gave life. I give life. That is who I am. That is what I do. I do not give you your circumstances.’ There are too many human and superhuman beings active in the here and now, not just God.

Second, God suffers with us. Notice that God gave Himself to Job. He came personally. And He comes personally to each one of us. God suffered in Jesus so He could suffer with all humanity. And He takes the Spirit of Jesus and puts the Spirit into each one of us who ask, so He can suffer with us individually and personally, *and comfort us*. He comforts us by retelling over and over how He loves *life* and cares for *life*.

I had investigated Buddhism at one point, and I thought, ‘The statue of this Buddha who had arms folded and eyes closed symbolized his not really being engaged in the pain of this world. In fact, many statues depict him as being fat, so he seems even further disengaged from issues of hunger and poverty.’ But I felt like Jesus was different. I read the Gospel of John, and when Jesus stood by the tomb of Lazarus and wept, I felt something. I thought, ‘He’s affected by what happens to us. He suffers with us. He enters into our world to show us that He suffers with us.’ Jesus’ arms were held out to help, and ultimately stretched out on a cross, never folded to himself. So by the end of my tenth grade year, I wrote a poem about Jesus’ suffering as a non-Christian. But I was beginning to see that if Jesus were real, if he was who he said he was, then he would understand me. He would *know*. And I found myself saying, ‘If there is a God, I hope He’s like this.’

Ultimately, I don’t think we really want a justification for our suffering. Why would we want to justify it??? I think we want someone to suffer with us. For good reasons and bad reasons, which I won’t get into here. Essentially we don’t want to be alone. We want a God who understands our own personal suffering, and comforts us. We find that God in Jesus and by the Spirit. We can be grateful for that. And let’s be mindful: We have a God who understands suffering even more deeply than we do. And that’s why He keeps asking for our partnership, to go back into the world to engage its suffering.

Third, God is ahead of your suffering. Later on, in other parts of the Old Testament and especially through Jesus’ resurrection, God shows that He cares so much about life that He offers resurrection life on the other side of death.

Illus: On November 6th, my friend Larry Kim and his wife Jenny had a baby boy, Emmett, who died four days after he was born. Emmett had a rare genetic condition where his organs developed outside his rib cage. He was not expected to live that long, perhaps a few hours after birth. But Larry and Jenny understood something: that this was not part of God’s originally good creation, but humanity’s decision to kick God out of the created world. So they were thankful that he lived for four days, and that his 2 year old brother got a chance to be with him. And of course they grieve now, but they also look forward to meeting Emmett again, in the resurrection, in a transformed and healed body.

That is the hope God gives us. God made the world good, physically and spiritually. This world has gone mad, but God has been working to restore us. He took the stained, corrupted human nature to Himself by coming personally

in Jesus. He healed and transformed that human nature in Jesus' resurrection. He will resurrect us all so we can walk into our eternal destinies. We can be grateful for that. Job says in 19:25 – 27:

^{19:25} As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, And at the last He will take His stand on the earth.

²⁶ Even after my skin is destroyed, Yet from my flesh I shall see God;

²⁷ Whom I myself shall behold, And whom my eyes will see and not another.

Communion

When we take communion, the bread and wine that Jesus invited us to take, we are demonstrating gratitude. Maybe for you right now, it is just a sliver of gratitude, and yet it is real. Jesus is reminding us of his suffering and death for many reasons, but one of them is that we would know we are not alone. He suffered with us. And he made a way through it. 'The Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.' (1 Corinthians 11:23 – 26) Lord, for that we are grateful.