

## Where Is God In New Orleans?

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Living Sanely In An Insane World Series

The Book of Job

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the Christian faith is the fact of suffering. They've done surveys and asked people: What is it that keeps you from believing in God? The number one answer that comes up over and over again has to do with suffering.

There are so many stories coming out of New Orleans like this one:

Lucretia Philips' sleepless nights are filled with the images of dead babies and women, and young and old men with tattered t-shirts or graying temples, all of whom she saw floating along the streets of the lower 9<sup>th</sup> ward. The deaths of many of her neighbors who chose to brave the hurricane from behind the walls of their Painter Street homes shook tears from Philips' bloodshot eyes Tuesday, as the harrowing tale of death and survival tumbled from her lips. "The rescuers in the boats that picked us up had to push the bodies back with sticks," Philips said sobbing. "And there was this little baby. She looked so perfect and so beautiful. I just wanted to scoop her up and breathe life back into her little lungs. She wasn't bloated or anything, just perfect."

A few hours after Philips, 42, and five members of her family and a friend had been rescued from the attic of her second story home in the 2700 block of Painter Street, she broke down with a range of emotion. Joy, for surviving the killer floods; pain for the loss of so many lives; and uncertainty, about the well-being of her family, missing in the city's most ravaged quarters. In a darkened lobby of the Downtown Hyatt Hotel turned refuge, she hugged an emergency worker closely; a handful of his sweaty blue t-shirt rippling from each of her fists. She had barely gotten out a fifth thank you when the emergency worker whispered into her ear that: "It was going to be OK," and that "It was our job to save lives."

Philips' downstairs neighbor, Terrilyn Foy, 41, and her 5-year old son, Trevor, were unable to escape, Philips said. By late Monday the surging water of Lake Pontchartrain had swallowed the neighborhood. The water crept, then rushed, under the front door, Philips said, then knocked it from its hinges. In less than 30 minutes, Philips said, the water had topped her neighbor's 12' ceiling and was gulping at hers. "I can still hear them banging on the ceiling for help," Philips said, shaking. "I heard them banging and banging, but the water kept rising." Then the pleas of help were silenced by the sway of the current, she said.

Philips and her family – her daughter and niece, 20 and 18; an uncle, 40, and his wife, 35, along with their 2-year old daughter, and a friend, 45, rushed to the attic for safety. The water was rising and death seemed near, she said. Her back was hurting from two bones she recently had fused during surgery for a car wreck. The group had been up there for hours and they were growing more frantic as each moment passed. The water kept rising. They saw it inching up. Philips said they didn't want to die like little 5-year old Trevor, or his mother, or the others who couldn't or wouldn't leave their neighborhood in the face of Katrina. So they pounded, kicked, and pulled at the wooden boards in the roof until something gave way. The boards around a vent near a trestle gave way. When the din of boat propellers seemed near, they screamed and waved shirts from the roof. Finally the din got closer and they could see from the broken out vent men in a boat. A few got in and then another boat arrived and picked up the others.

The seven of them were safe, but Philips has not heard from her mother or father, both of whom are 62, nor does she know what happened to her mother and father's 13 siblings from across the city. By late Tuesday, 90% of the city of New Orleans was under water. "I know this storm killed so many people," Philips said. "There is no 9<sup>th</sup> ward no more. No 8<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> ward, or East New Orleans. All those people, all them people, they're all drowned."

Over the last few days we've watched horrible scenes of thousands of refugees from Hurricane Katrina, dazed, many injured filling up the Superdome and walking along elevated highways to nowhere. We've heard stories of the filth and lack of sanitation in the convention center. Dead bodies left along the roadside. Desperate refugees clamoring for food and water and attention. And the misery was made worse by lawlessness and sniper fire.

But suffering is an everyday occurrence, not just from hurricanes. Listen to this article that appeared in this week's Sport's Illustrated:

The cruelest joke in sports history has to be the one that fate played on a skinny sunbeam named Joe Kay.

Joe Kay was one of Arizona's best high school volleyball players. All-Conference in basketball. Scholarship to Stanford. Class Valedictorian. Perfect math score on the SAT. President of the Associated Students Against Hunger. Lead sax in the school band. Vegetarian.

All until this moment: It is the night of February 6, 2004. Joe Kay is the 6'5", 175 pound flagpole whose monster dunk has just put Tuscan High up for good against archrival and state powerhouse Salpointe. The fans are

chanting his name as if it were one happy word: “Joekay! Joekay! Joekay!”

The buzzer sounds, the rafter-scratching crowd of one thousand spills onto the floor as if a dyke has burst. A throng of delirious boys runs madly at Joe Kay, out of their minds with desire to grab, carry, and/or dog-pile their hero, all at once. But for Joe Kay it is like being hugged by the 5:15 train. They are coming too hard. He tries to brace himself, but two guys flat out tackle him. A dozen more pile on. Joe Kay gets twisted. Something freaky happens inside his neck.

Joe Kay winds up in a hospital, his right side is paralyzed, and he can't say a word. In another room, the doctor is telling Joe Kay's mother, Suzanne, that when her son got body slammed, his carotid artery was briefly blocked, keeping blood from his brain. Joe Kay had a stroke. “This is big, this is permanent, and this is devastating,” the doctor said. Joe Kay was not a braggart, not evil, not a spoiled jerk. Why hit him with a lightening bolt the very moment he scaled Everest? Why take one of the greatest moments of his life and, three seconds later, make it the worst? How could a bunch of students trying to idolize him paralyze him instead?

The fact of suffering, global suffering that we read about in faraway places like the Sudan or Niger, or Iraq, or the current suffering on the Gulf Coast, or more personally, our own suffering – the suffering of a car accident that leaves you disabled, the suffering of watching a parent or a mate gradually dim out as a result of Alzheimer's, the suffering of losing a child to a miscarriage, or to AIDS, the suffering of undergoing chemo treatments with all of the side effects, the suffering of loneliness as a single person, a divorced person, as a widow or widower – whenever we encounter suffering that goes unhealed, undealt with, and our prayers go unanswered, the question of God comes to our minds. As I said before, the fact of suffering constitutes the greatest challenge to the Christian faith - great suffering like the Holocaust, or what we have witnessed this week in New Orleans, and smaller disappointments like losing your job, or having your body remain unhealed.

In light of the hurricane this week, I've called today's talk, “Where is God In New Orleans?” We are going to be looking at the classic book in the Bible that deals with suffering and God, the book of Job. Let's pray.

As we consider suffering, our own suffering, or the suffering of other people, and we try to explain that suffering, the most common explanation that we come up with in every generation, for every group, in virtually every religion, is that we deserve our suffering. We reap what we sow. You made your bed, now lie in it.

You know, this idea that we're getting what we deserve is probably the first thing that comes to our minds concerning ourselves when we suffer. Most of us are

painfully aware of our sins. So we immediately say, "I am experiencing this suffering because I am being punished. My husband wouldn't have taken up with his secretary, if I were a better wife." "Maybe my child got killed by a drunk driver because when I was in high school I drove drunk." The solution we almost always go to in our own minds is we are responsible for our own suffering.

Sometimes it is true. Certainly, life demonstrates the truth of these maxims. If you smoke two packs of cigarettes a day for 35 years, you may end up with emphysema. If you steal from your employer, you will lose your job. If you run up your credit cards because of unchecked appetites, you will end up in debt. If you regularly blow up at your mate, or scream at and abuse your fiancée, they may leave you. And if you are a very controlling, critical parent, your children may not want to have anything to do with you. There is truth in the idea that we reap what we sow.

This is the solution that many so-called prophets leap to whenever a disaster strikes. There was a horrific prophecy that was emailed to me this week that read this way:

Several prophetic voices have suggested that there may be a connection between America putting pressure on Israel to leave the Gaza and the hurricane that struck New Orleans. Perhaps God is forcing America to know what it means to leave houses, to be refugees not knowing if they will ever live in them again.

Of course, the prophetic word says nothing about the suffering experienced by Palestinians in Gaza over the last 40 years, or the difficulty of trying to sort through the very legitimate claims of Jewish people and the very legitimate claims of Palestinians. No, the prophets have immediately discerned God's hand in striking New Orleans in response to the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza.

And then we come to the book of Job. Job lost virtually everything a person could lose. He suffered the loss of all of his worldly possessions. His business absolutely failed. Job lost his reputation. Children and old people mocked him in his community. Job suffered the loss of each of his beloved sons and daughters. And Job, himself, was wracked with great physical pain – pain that plagued him from morning till night.

It is hard to conceive of worse suffering than the suffering of Job. How do we explain it? Job's friends said: "You deserve it."

Look at Job 22:5-11

SLIDE

Job 22:5 Is not your wickedness great?

Are not your sins endless?

Job 22:6 You demanded security from your brothers for no reason;  
you stripped men of their clothing, leaving them naked.

Job 22:7 You gave no water to the weary

and you withheld food from the hungry,

Job 22:8 though you were a powerful man, owning land—  
an honored man, living on it.

Job 22:9 And you sent widows away empty-handed  
and broke the strength of the fatherless.

Job 22:10 That is why snares are all around you,  
why sudden peril terrifies you,

Job 22:11 why it is so dark you cannot see,  
and why a flood of water covers you.

His friends savage him with accusations. You are a wicked, evil man, that's why you are suffering.

The problem with this analysis of Job's condition is that these accusations are all false. Job was not an evil man. Job did not mistreat the poor or send the hungry away empty. We're told that in the very first verse of the book of Job where we read:

#### SLIDE

Job 1:1 In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.

Not only does the author of the book of Job tell us that Job was good, but God himself says Job is a good man. Look at Job 1:8,

#### SLIDE

Job 1:8 Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil."

And do you know that throughout the history of the Christian church we read of good men and women, men and women who loved God and who were following him more closely than any of their contemporaries, who suffered greatly. The great St. Augustine died of a wasting disease when his city was under siege by the barbarians. Teresa of Avila, a devoted prayer warrior, suffered through years of intense migraines. Brother Lawrence, the author of the wonderful little book titled "Practicing the Presence of God," never got over his chronic gout. Gout also for years afflicted the great Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon. Spurgeon's gout was so painful that for years he could barely put on a pair of socks, much less stand or walk.

Francis of Assisi, who loved to see God in nature, wrote the Canticle of the Creatures, in which you have those famous lines: "Praise be you, my Lord, with

all your creatures especially Brother Sun, who rules the day, and through whom you give us light. Praise be you, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars in heaven. You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.” He wrote these lines when he was nearly blind.

So, yes, we often reap what we sow. But in Job’s case, he was not reaping what he sowed. He was a good man. We might say that Job is the Bible’s book of protest against formula thinking that we often easily fall into. The book of Job is the Bible’s great book of protest against the superficial use of books like the book of Proverbs. Yes, the book of Proverbs says things like Proverbs 10:3,

#### SLIDES

Pr 10:3 The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry  
but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.

Pr 14:11 The house of the wicked will be destroyed,  
but the tent of the upright will flourish.

Yes, the book of Proverbs offers us general principles of life, that life goes better for you, if you obey God’s law than if you don’t. As a general rule, hard work leads to success, and as a general rule, if we sin, we’ll get it in the neck.

But not always. The book of Job is a book of protest against the overly superficial glib use of Proverbs and other wisdom literature in the Bible. The book of Job says our life experience does not always follow the formula.

Sometimes people with high standards who seek God and who are faithful get the short-end of the stick of life. A woman wrote me just this last week and said:

*My husband of 28 years decided lots of women was a better life for him than being married to one Christian woman. Unfortunately, before I found out about his affairs, he gave me Herpes. I have felt like a leper ever since and I hate it. I feel it will prevent me from ever knowing married love again, and I’m reluctant to let anyone get close to me because I am ashamed. I don’t really want to be alone the rest of my life, but how can I risk anyone else?*

She goes on to say:

*It has been five years and I still cry about it.*

Our life experience doesn’t always follow the formula. Her husband, she writes:

*Was not able to face advancing age. He kept saying he wanted something better than God. Now he has a new wife, a new home, and a new job. His Christian wife has encouraged him to get right with God, but he says he is OK with God. He’s happy.*

She writes:

*Yes, he's happy, but it was at my expense.*

I know people who have sought God and who have high standards for dating, and they remain single and don't get married. And I know rare people who have dated outside the faith and their live-in boyfriends have become followers of Christ. Now this is rare and I think it is incredibly foolish to hope that if you jump off the roof, you will go up and not down, but it sometimes happens.

I've watched the children of some of the most selfish, self-indulgent, neglectful parents end up being successful and productive. And I know children of devoted parents who have gotten into drugs, car wrecks, and broken their parents' hearts.

Well, perhaps, God is not good. Maybe God, you are strong. Maybe you can do anything. But you are capricious. You are random in your handing out of benefits. You are not just and you are not loving.

And this is where Job goes in his thinking. Look with me at Job 9:21,

#### SLIDE

Job 9:21 "Although I am blameless,

I have no concern for myself;

I despise my own life.

Job 9:22 It is all the same; that is why I say,

'He destroys both the blameless and the wicked.'

Job 9:23 When a scourge brings sudden death,

he mocks the despair of the innocent.

Job 9:24 When a land falls into the hands of the wicked,

he blindfolds its judges.

If it is not he, then who is it?

He doesn't let God off the hook and say: Well, this is just life. No. It is not just life. I believe in a sovereign God, a God who is in control. He is not the sole cause of everything, but clearly everything happens at least by God's permission. Job says evil seems to be indiscriminate. A hurricane comes and it kills good people and bad people alike in New Orleans.

You know, it is easy to look at New Orleans and say: Well, it is Sin City, what with the Mardi Gras there and all of the sexual immorality and witchcraft.

But you know, there are over 700 churches in New Orleans. Do you know that we have half a dozen Vineyard churches in New Orleans? One of our Vineyard Churches is downtown church just a few blocks from the Superdome. The Vineyard pastor there said that not only is his church building completely wiped

out, but he wept as he watched on TV members from his church standing on roof tops waiting to be rescued.

Another Vineyard church in New Orleans was about to open their brand new church building this weekend. They've been renting for 19 years. They just build a \$5 million building. They can't get to the building. They don't think the damage was extensive, but their people are scattered. The pastor said, "Well, we may have a building, but I don't know how much of a church we've got left."

Good people have lost their jobs. Good people have lost their houses. A hurricane comes and kills good people and bad people alike. (And by the way, before we look at the New Orleans and say, "It is obviously God's judgment on really evil people, let's together remember Jesus' admonition in Luke 13:2-5. We should view these events as warnings to the rest of us – God is giving us a chance to repent as a nation.)

God is not good. The basic charge against Christianity and the Christian view of God is the sheer magnitude of suffering that exists in this world. Sigmund Freud, who was an atheist, said he couldn't possibly believe in a good God. He said if God exists, the first thing Freud wanted to do was to shake a cancerous bone of a child in his face and say: Explain this!

Rick Reilly, who wrote the article about Joe Kay that I referred to earlier in the talk, that wonderfully gifted, talented, brilliant young man who was gang-tackled on the basketball floor and ended up suffering a stroke, said this: *"Joe Kay was not a braggart, not evil, not a spoiled jerk. Why hit him with a lightning bolt the very moment he scaled Everest? Why take one of the greatest moments of his life and, three seconds later, make it the worst? How could a bunch of students trying to idolize him paralyze him instead? If it were me, I would sue God."*

Have you never doubted the goodness or the justice of God? Have you ever looked at something and said, "How do I square this with my theology that God is good?" Or have you ever been confronted by someone who challenges God's goodness?

CS Lewis, the brilliant Christian writer from Oxford University, in one of his many leaps of genius, argued that the fact of suffering and evil might, in fact, be great evidence of a good God. The fact that we are outraged by suffering, the fact that we are angry, the fact that we declare something to be wrong, presupposes that we have an objective standard in our minds. When we say this is wrong, we mean, of course, that we are aware that something is right. We are aware that this particular evil, this suffering, this tragedy departs from a fixed standard of goodness, of justice.

Let me put it this way. It doesn't make any sense to say something is unfair, or unjust unless we have in our minds a standard of fairness or justice that this



particular event doesn't measure up to. If every line that ever existed is crooked and bent, if we never encountered a straight line, how could we ever come up with the idea that this particular line is crooked and bent?

So, for a person who says this hurricane, this rape, this starvation is wrong, we would ask, how do you know it is wrong? If we're making up the rules and the standards as we go if everything is good, decent and just, depend on the person and the situation, and the culture—if we are all just randomly thrown together bits of stardust, bouncing off one another, then what meaning is there in the statement: This is unjust. This is unfair. If we protest against evil like Sigmund Freud did, or we are confused and upset like Job, if you rage about your pain and suffering because it is unfair, it means that buried somewhere in your person, buried in your unconscious perhaps, is a sense of good, a sense of justice, a sense of right.

And so the question arises, where did you get this sense from? Why does everyone, everywhere in the world have in them a sense of a straight line, if every line is crooked? Where did we get our sense of what is good?

Christians would say: Our sense of what is good has come from the one who is supremely good, namely God.

CS Lewis, in his characteristic brilliance, said: "If the universe is so bad and so rotten, how on earth did human beings ever come up with belief in a beneficent, supreme, loving, all-wise, and all good Creator unless, of course, such a good God exists and revealed himself to us? The very idea that something is evil means that we have in our minds a standard of what is right and good. That standard has to be accounted for somewhere. When we push back, we are pushing against something solid, not just air. When we react, and rebel and rage, we are reacting, rebelling and raging against someone who exists, a good God."

Well, maybe God is good, but he's not powerful. Now, Job never goes here. It would not have occurred to pre-modern men and women that God was not powerful. They constantly lived with the overwhelmingly power of nature. They experienced the storms and hurricanes and lightening. They looked at wonder at the stars that have now been blotted out by light pollution. They heard the roaring of waterfalls that have now been dammed up and rerouted. And pre-modern men and women just assumed that the One who made all of this was powerful. Our technology has shielded us to the experience of raw power until something like a hurricane happens and wipes out an entire geographical area.

Denying God's power is a peculiarly modern response to the problem of suffering. This is the solution, by the way, that Rabbi Kushner comes to in his book titled "When Bad Things Happen To Good People." This is the solution that many Christian writers come to in what's called "process theology." God is good,

but he is unable to work many of his purposes in the world. He's good, but he's weak.

This is a particularly attractive option in a therapeutic culture. We want to hold on to God being loving, kind, and God comforting us. We want to crawl up on his lap and have him hug us. Unfortunately, he's not very strong. He is a really nice, but he is an unbelievably ineffective Father. I know he cares. He is just pretty passive and he can't protect me from the bully.

Now, some people find comfort in Rabbi Kushner's view – God is good, just not almighty. I find no comfort in that. Because that sows doubt in my mind about whether goodness will triumph in the end. Does it really matter what I do? Maybe Jesus was wrong. Maybe the meek won't inherit the earth. Maybe Nietzsche was right. Maybe the earth will only go to the ruthless and the strong.

Job doubted if God's goodness and power could be brought together somehow in the face of suffering. But here's the response that God offers – the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The resurrection brings together not only the goodness of God, but the power of God. The resurrection tells us about the triumph of good in this world. Good will win.

God is not just good, he is strong. He's not just a nice but ineffective Father; he is the Almighty, the Sovereign, the Omnipotent. He can defeat any enemy, even death.

Well, maybe God doesn't exist. This, according to the Bible, is the fool's solution. Psalm 14:1 says,

#### SLIDE

Ps 14:1 The fool says in his heart,  
"There is no God."  
They are corrupt, their deeds are vile;  
there is no one who does good.

According to the Bible, the atheist is not a brilliant rationalist, who is willing to stare at the evidence and not blink. According to the Bible, the atheist is the person who rejects the evidence, who is biased against the evidence, who suppresses the evidence. As Romans 1:18 says,

#### SLIDE

Ro 1:18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness,

Atheists, according to the Bible, are people who are involved in the psychological defense mechanism of repression. The atheist is a person who's doing everything they can to banish from their thinking the perception and feeling of

someone too terrible for them to contemplate, namely a God who will hold us accountable, a God who demands our obedience.

So, where do we go? If all of these options are blind alleys, if the issue of suffering in this particular case is not a matter of retribution for our sin, if we decide that the answer that God is not good, or God is not strong, or God doesn't exist are all dead-end answers, then where do we go with the fact of what's happening in New Orleans?

We are constantly confronted by suffering, either our own or someone else's. Maybe you have a family member or friend who lives on the Gulf Coast. Or your favorite grandparent dies. Sometimes you meet someone who is suffering because they've lost a favorite pet that they've been caring for and who's given them love for 10-15 years. What do you say to a person who is grieving the suicide of one of their children, or who discovers that one of their children has leukemia, or who discovers that their spouse has been having a long-term affair with one of their closest friends?

Sometimes the best thing you can say is nothing. Look at Job 2:11-13,

#### SLIDE

Job 2:11 When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him.

Job 2:12 When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads.

Job 2:13 Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

When someone is suffering, when someone pulls the curtain back on their life and describes in detail the sexual abuse they suffered for years at the hands of a family member, sometimes the very best response you can have is to say nothing. Job's friends started off on the wisest and most loving course possible. They just offered Job their presence. Just being willing to be present and to stay with and sit with the suffering is one of the hardest things that we, as human beings, can ever do.

Our presence in the face of suffering is unbelievably costly. Our natural response to suffering is to run away from it. We don't want to be around people who are grieving, or who are raging, or who are spinning. We want to be around happy people, successful people, and people who are going to lift our mood up.

Well, friends, I'll tell you that the most precious gift we can offer someone who is suffering is the gift of our simple presence. Ask anyone who has gone through real pain, real suffering, what the most helpful thing to them was and many

people will say something like: My friend was there for me. I just appreciated the fact that she came over and sat with me. Her physical presence, his physical presence, allowed me to not feel completely alone, or swallowed up by my suffering. The fact that I knew that I had a standing invitation to dinner, and that I could just go and be with her, or be with him, made a huge difference.

On the other hand, often when we begin to speak, even though our words are well intentioned, we actually burden the person more. As Job says in Job 16:2-5,

#### SLIDE

Job 16:2 "I have heard many things like these;

miserable comforters are you all!

Job 16:3 Will your long-winded speeches never end?

What ails you that you keep on arguing?

Job 16:4 I also could speak like you,

if you were in my place;

I could make fine speeches against you

and shake my head at you.

Job 16:5 But my mouth would encourage you;

comfort from my lips would bring you relief.

I've had this experience of people trying to comfort me and talking nervously about my problems, about life. I'm sure I've done this with others. But their words ended up actually weighing me down and I just wanted to say: "Just stop. I know you care. But you don't have answers. Just prove to be my friend by being with me and let's talk about something other than my grief."

So, what are some true things that we discover about suffering? First of all, we discover that we need to offer each other the gift of our presence.

We also discover that we can offer suffering people the gift of practical help. This, of course, is what Jesus' famous story of the Good Samaritan is all about. A Samaritan man sees a Jewish man beaten, lying in the middle of the road. And so he picks this man up, gives him medical attention, transports him to a local inn, pays the hotel bill as long as the man's needs shelter.

Here at Vineyard Columbus, we want to respond in thoughtful, practical ways to this enormous crisis. Short-term, we are taking an offering this week and next. We are trying to coordinate an effort with other local churches in our city and the Mayor's office to throw the doors of the city of Columbus open to hundreds and hundreds of refugee families. What we hope to do over this next week is to create a coordinated effort of the Christian community so that we as churches adopt hundreds and hundreds of families. We need to take care of people's need for housing, clothing, schooling over this next year.

I just got a call today informing me that the first refugees will be in our city by tomorrow night. The mayor's office asked if we can help with meals. We'll be communicating with you over the next few weeks about how you can assist.

There are tens of thousands of people who lost everything. This is an opportunity for the church to stand up, to sacrificially give, to tighten our own belts and to hear the call of Jesus when he says in Matthew 25:35-36,

#### SLIDE

Mt 25:35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,  
Mt 25:36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

We need to see Jesus in this suffering of the men, women, and children who we're watching on our TV screens.

We also discover that we are confused about who is being tested in suffering. The reason we come up with false answers is that we think suffering calls God into question. That was Job's view. He believed that the person on trial was God. Job wanted to act as a prosecutor charging God with a crime. We read in Job 23:

#### SLIDE

Job 23:1 Then Job replied:  
Job 23:2 "Even today my complaint is bitter;  
his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning.  
Job 23:3 If only I knew where to find him;  
if only I could go to his dwelling!  
Job 23:4 I would state my case before him  
and fill my mouth with arguments.  
Job 23:5 I would find out what he would answer me,  
and consider what he would say.

What Job doesn't realize is that God is not on trial, Job is on trial. See, Job wasn't aware of Job 1-2. But we, the readers, are taken behind the scenes and we read about this little contest between God and Satan. What we discover in Job 1-2 is that the book of Job is not a book about the testing of God; it is a book about the testing of Job. God points out this reality to Job in Job 38:2-3,

#### SLIDE

Job 38:2 "Who is this that darkens my counsel  
with words without knowledge?  
Job 38:3 Brace yourself like a man;  
I will question you,  
and you shall answer me.

God says the same thing in Job 40:

SLIDE

Job 40:1 The LORD said to Job:

Job 40:2 "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him?  
Let him who accuses God answer him!"

This is a truth that runs through the entire Bible. We never can put God to the test. He is always the tester. And we are always the one being quizzed. You see that when Jesus is questioned by his opponents. His enemies tried to pin him down, but what happens? He pins them down. They try to judge him; he judges them. They try to question him, and he questions them. Whenever Jesus' opponents try to test Jesus, they find they are the ones being tested.

This is a further truth we learn about suffering. Suffering is a test. It presents a human being with a clear choice regarding where we are going to go with our life, and where we are going to go with our faith.

Haven't you seen the very different reactions to the terrible events in the Gulf this week? You see at least three or four very different reactions from people in suffering.

First, you've heard people who are just absolutely despairing of life itself. People have just broken down as they've watched everything they've worked for washed away. They are kind of wandering around in a daze saying, "I don't know where I'm going to go; I don't know what I'm going to do. We've lost everything."

A second response that you've seen is one of anger. People lashing out at the government. People lashing out at each other. Lawlessness.

A third response that I've heard from so many folks is a response of gratitude and faith. "We are thankful to be alive. We just know Jesus Christ is going to provide."

What is the test presented to us in suffering? It is the test of humility vs. pride. God comes to Job in ch. 38 and reminds Job of his limitations. In wonderfully poetic language, God says: Job, you are limited. You are raging against me. You are accusing me of injustice. You are calling into question my goodness, but you are limited.

You are limited in your experience. Job 38:16-17,

SLIDE

Job 38:16 "Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea  
or walked in the recesses of the deep?

Job 38:17 Have the gates of death been shown to you?  
Have you seen the gates of the shadow of death ?

You are limited in your knowledge. Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this, what is the way to the abode of light? And where does darkness reside? You are limited in your lifespan. Can you take me to the places? Do you know the paths to their dwelling? Surely you know, for you are already born. You have lived so many years. You are limited in your power. Verse 31

#### SLIDE

Job 38:31 "Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades?

Can you loose the cords of Orion?

Job 38:32 Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons  
or lead out the Bear with its cubs?

Job 38:33 Do you know the laws of the heavens?

Can you set up L God'sJ dominion over the earth?

Job 38:34 "Can you raise your voice to the clouds  
and cover yourself with a flood of water?

Job 38:35 Do you send the lightning bolts on their way?  
Do they report to you, 'Here we are'?

Apart from the World Trade Center attack, are you aware of anything in your lifetime that has demonstrated more vividly the limits of human ability than this hurricane? You know, we Americans love to think that our technological capacity can solve almost anything. And then we are confronted with this massive natural disaster that has shut down all communication. The police can't communicate with one another. Cell phones aren't working. All the electric has been knocked out. All of the sewer systems have been broken. There is no clean water.

I heard the cries of suffering people in New Orleans and the Gulf area saying, "Why is the government not doing anything?" I thought my goodness, the power that you have encountered goes so far beyond what the government can do. The police department was absolutely overwhelmed in New Orleans. Perhaps you heard the Mayor of New Orleans break down in tears in his interview on CNN. They don't have the manpower to adequately deal with it. They are trying to form a perimeter in certain parts of the city. The Mayor said that they are praying to God that they are not overrun by drug addicts.

America, God is saying will you insist on living life independent of me as if you can solve every problem on your own? Or will you confess that you are limited and dependent. Let me ask you this: What will it take for you to say "Uncle, I give up. I need God. I can't do life entirely on my own."

What is being tested? In suffering, what is being tested friend are our desires. Bottom line: What do you really want in life? That was the test that Satan presented right from the beginning. The question with which he probed Job and Job's motivation was this, Job. 1:9,

#### SLIDE

Job 1:9 "Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied.

The only reason Job is following you, God, is because of what he gets out of it. It is not you he wants. It is not a relationship with you. It is not because you are good, because he values you, because he values your friendship, because he values your companionship, because he values intimacy with you. God, it's not you he wants. You are not his supreme value; it is what you can give him. It is his family, his business, his health, and his reputation. Start taking that away from him, and he will curse you to your face.

What is suffering about? It is a test of what you really want in life, friend. We say we are followers of Jesus Christ, but what does that mean? For so many, it simply means I love Jesus because he gives me what I really want. And what I really want is health. I want my house. I want my neighborhood. What I really want is a spouse, who cares about me and loves me. What I really want in life is a job that pays my bills. Yes, I want God, but I want God because God is a heavenly butler, a cosmic genie, who gives me what I want. I want God the way the Muslims view heaven with 72 wives and 72 virgins.

What do you want, friends? Where are we Christians left? We are left with God. Job 42:1-6,

#### SLIDE

Job 42:1 Then Job replied to the LORD?

Job 42:2 "I know that you can do all things;  
no plan of yours can be thwarted.

Job 42:3 L You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?'

Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,  
things too wonderful for me to know.

Job 42:4 L "You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak;  
I will question you,  
and you shall answer me.'

Job 42:5 My ears had heard of you  
but now my eyes have seen you.

Job 42:6 Therefore I despise myself  
and repent in dust and ashes."



Where are we left? We're left with God. Job had heard about God, but now his eyes see God. He's brought to an intimate relationship with God. Here is one of the most fundamental issues presented to the sufferer in the book of Job. What are you in this Christian life for? What are you into Christ for? Are you into Christ because of what Christ gives you? Are you into Christ for some other end, or are you into Christ? Is Christ the end?

Where is God in New Orleans? Where is God in America? He is here. The issue is do we want him? Is he enough for us? Let's pray.

## **Where Is God In New Orleans?**

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Rich Nathan

September 3-4, 2006

Living Sanely In An Insane World Series

The Book of Job

### **I. The Answers We Latch Onto**

- A. We Are Not Good (Job 11:13-20; 18:5-21)
  - 1. Response To Job's Goodness (Job 1:1,8)
  - 2. Rejection Of Formula Thinking (Jn. 9:1-3)
- B. God Is Not Good (Job 9:21-24)
- C. God Is Not Powerful
- D. God Does Not Exist (Ps. 14:1)

### **II. The Questions Posed To Us**

- A. What Do You Say To A Suffering Person? (Job 2:11-13; 42:7,8)
- B. Who Is Being Tested? (Job 1,2; 38:2,3; 40:1,2)
- C. What Is Being Tested?
  - 1. Our Limits (Job 38,39)
  - 2. Our Desires (Job 1:9-11; 42:5)
- D. Where Are We Left?