

Where is God When I Suffer?

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Where is God When Life is Hard 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.

Just pick up the morning newspaper and you can find yourself overwhelmed with the magnitude of suffering in this world. Just yesterday I was reading through the newspaper and among the articles that I read was a story about a local man who has been accused of raping two mentally disabled sisters. According to the accusation, this man began having sex with these two mentally disabled girls when they were just children. One of the girls recently gave birth to this man's child.

The same newspaper reported the death of two local people, who were killed by a drunk driver. And this was the drunk driver's second drunk driving offense in two weeks.

Here are two stories from a recent news reports. The one takes place in Sudan where, according to the United Nations, we are facing the greatest humanitarian crisis in the world. Here's how the article begins:

There are tents here that no parent wants to visit. They are called "seating centers," shady rectangular units where children fight death. Sitting on a mat and holding his son's frail hand, Mohammed Ishaq and his wife, Aisha, have been here five days, nursing nine month old Zohar on drops of water from a large pink cup, praying that somehow he will survive.

Zohar spits up the water. His cough is rough, and his thin skin clings to his ribs. His withered left arm is connected to an IV. He is suffering from malaria, complicated by malnutrition. Near him other parents rock, nurse, and pray for their babies, who are passed out or are moaning, their eyes rolled back as they vomit emergency rations of corn and oil.

Mornay is the largest refugee camp in the region. It is a labyrinth of suffering, where one child in five is acutely malnourished, aid workers say, where for six months 75,000 people have lived on less than half the food they need to survive, where six people die every day, mainly children and the elderly, from hunger and disease.

Just pick up a local newspaper on any given day and if your heart is at all sensitive, the magnitude of sheer suffering that exists in this world will overwhelm you.

The last article that I will mention appeared recently and begins this way:

During a drug raid on the far south side of Chicago on Saturday, the police found a 3-year old boy chained by the neck to a bed in a foster home where they also found cocaine, marijuana, and unregistered firearms. On Friday, responding to a teacher's aid's report of child abuse, the police found six youngsters—all former wards of the state—locked in an unheated basement with no food or toilet and only a quilt and a few pillows to cover the concrete floor.

I won't continue reading the article; it is too horrific to read publicly.

The fact of suffering, global suffering that we read about in faraway places like the Sudan or Rwanda, or Bangladesh, or local suffering through child abuse or sexual abuse, or drunk driving accidents; 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 SIDS, 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, and smaller disappointments like losing your job, or having your body remain unhealed.

I've called today's talk, "Where is God When I Suffer?" 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.

And then we come to the book of Job. Job suffered virtually everything a person could suffer. 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?

Look at Job 22:5:

Job 22:5

Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless? You demanded security from your brothers for no reason; you stripped men of their clothing, leaving them naked. You gave no water to the weary and you withheld food from the hungry, though you were a powerful man, owning land—an honored man, living on it. And you sent widows away empty-handed and broke the strength of the fatherless. That is why snares are all around you, why sudden peril terrifies you, 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:

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:

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:

Proverbs 10:3

The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.

Proverbs 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 low standards and no thought about God's will for their dating relationships luck out. I've seen it. I know people who've dated outside the faith and their live-in boyfriends became followers of Christ; they ended up having a happy Christian marriage with great companionship. Their spouse was wildly successful in business. Sometimes the formula doesn't work. This is very rare. I think you're unbelievably foolish to hope that if you jump off the roof, you'll go up and not down. But it occasionally happens.

And I know people who have sought God, who have high standards for their dating, and they remain single and don't get married. They don't have companionship. I have 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, and 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:

Job 9:21

Although I am blameless, I have no concern for myself; I despise my own life. It is all the same; that is why I say, "He destroys both the blameless and the wicked." When a scourge brings sudden death, he mocks the despair of the innocent. 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 plague comes and it kills good people and bad people alike. A terrorist comes to the country, blows up a shopping mall, or hits the World Trade Center with a plane and it is not just wicked people who die in terrorist attacks. There were good mothers and good fathers, and good sons and good daughters and faithful husbands and loving wives, and devout Christians who died along side of the greedy, the adulterers and the child-abusers on Sept. 11th.

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!

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?

C.S. 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 murder, 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.

C.S. Lewis, in 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.

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:

Psalm 14:1

The fool says in his heart there is no God.

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:

Romans 1:18

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against 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 suffering?

We are constantly confronted by suffering, either our own or someone else's. Your friend's dad dies. 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:

Job 2:11-13

When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about the 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. 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. 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.

Our natural response is to avoid suffering people, or to try to fix them. This person is in pain. They're grieving the loss of their mother or father or the rebellion of their child. You think, "I've got to say something – something wise, something clever, something that will lessen their pain." Presence without speaking, without fixing the problem, without advice makes us vulnerable. It is costly to simply bear someone else's hurt. It is costly to simply sit in a hospital room, or visit a nursing home because we Type A Americans are not being productive, because we could be doing something more valuable. We could be making something happen and we aren't.

And you know that this fix-it mentality is there because we often overtly or implicitly communicate to a suffering person that there is a time limit we have on suffering. We have an internal alarm clock that goes off and communicates to the sufferer that their time of suffering should be over. Their suffering has become an inconvenience to us. We are tired of hearing about the problem. We want to scream, and sometimes we do: "Get over it. Move on." So there is a one-month limit on grief. Or a six-month limit, or at most a year, and then you move on past the death of your son.

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:

Job 16:2-5

I have heard many things like these; miserable comforters are you all. Will your long-winded speeches never end? What ails you that you keep on arguing? 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. 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 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:

Job 23

Then Job replied: Even today my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning. If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. 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 context 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:

Job 38:2-3

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

God says the same thing in Job 40:

Job 40

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. 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:

Job 38:16-17

Have you journeyed to the spring of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? 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:

Job 38:31

Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion? Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons or lead out the bear with its cubs? Do you know the laws of the heavens? Can you set up God's dominion over the earth? Can you raise your voice to the clouds and cover yourself with a flood of water? Do you send the lightning bolts on their way? Do they report to you, "Here we are?"

Job, you cannot answer, you cannot possibly fathom the working out of my plan in the world. Sufferer, you cannot possibly fathom the working out of God's purposes and plans in your life or in the world. You are being tested. Here is the choice: will you insist that you have all of the perspective and all of the information and all of the knowledge and all of the power to render a judgment on God, or will you kneel in humility and say: Lord, I am so small. I have such a tiny perspective. I am a flea trying to comprehend an elephant. I can't possibly comprehend how you could bring good out of this. Or how you will fulfill your promises to me to work everything together for good. But I declare that I am not your judge. You are my judge. I am limited. You are infinite. I see in part, you see everything.

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:

Job 1:9

Does Job fear God for nothing?

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. 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:

Job 42

Then Job replied to the Lord: I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. [God is powerful.] You asked, "Who is this that obscures my counsel without my knowledge?" Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. [Job is limited.] You said, "Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me." [Job is the one being tested, not God.] My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. 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? See that's what heaven is all about. We are to desire heaven because what we get is God!

Friends, suffering produces a purifying, a sorting of our hearts, and a redefining of our priorities.

And then we read at the end of the book of Job, Job 42:10:

Job 42:10

After Job had prayed for his friends, the Lord made him prosperous again and gave him twice as much as he had before. All his brothers and sisters and everyone who had known him before came and ate with him in his house. They comforted and consoled him over the trouble the Lord had brought upon him, and each one gave him a piece of silver and a gold ring. The Lord blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first. He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys. And he also had seven sons and three daughters. The first daughter he named Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-Hap-puch. Nowhere in all the land were there found women as beautiful as Job's daughters, and their father granted them an inheritance along with their brothers. After this, Job lived a hundred and forty years; he saw his children and their children to the fourth generation. And so he died, old and full of years.

I've got to be honest with you and tell you that I have never liked the ending of the book of Job. In the past, it seemed too Hollywood for me. Things were sown up too neatly. It was too tinsel. It was like one of those sitcoms where everything comes together and they live happily ever after. It almost seemed anticlimactic to me as a literary matter. If I were writing the book, I would have ended with verse 5:

Job 42:5

My ears have heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you.

I would have ended with Job's encounter with God and said the meaning of the book is: All you need is God! I've got to be honest with you and I've speculated in the past, maybe this ending was put there by a later editor.

But as I've meditated upon this ending, I think there is a deeper issue of faith that I missed in the past. This ending is inspired. Let me go through the thought process with you quickly in closing.

We all have hopes in life about the way the script of our life is going to be written. For example, if you have a child, whether you say these things or not, implicit in your hope is the expectation that your child is going to be healthy, that they aren't going to be disabled, that they are going to grow up, if you are a Christian, they are going to love and follow God, that they are going to be productive, that they will get married happily so to another believer and one day have children so that you have grandchildren. That's the expectation.

But along the way we suffer because our expectations, our hopes, are disappointed. Our child is not healthy. Our child dies. Our child walks away from the faith and rejects everything that we taught them. Our child goes through a divorce. Our child is not productive. So we are tested. When our expectation for the way that the script of our life is going to be written turns out much differently

than the way the script is written. We are faced with a choice. We can walk away from Christ. We can say: You know, this Christian thing is not paying off. Christ didn't give me what I wanted. To heck with him. I'll just rely on myself. Or we can continue on with Christ.

Now, here's what I observe. Many people who have been through suffering and say: I'm going to continue on with Christ have hollowed out expectations regarding what Christ might do for them. I guess the only thing I get out of life is escaping from hell, they say. If anything in life is going to work out, it's going to work out in heaven. I get eternal life. But right now, in this world, I go to church and I go through the motions. But I don't expect any real breakthroughs in this world, in my life.

Many people who go through suffering continue to hold onto God. But they pretty much gut all the promises of God. "Yes, I know that it says that in the Bible and maybe somehow it works for someone else, or it will work for me in eternity, but the promises of God don't work for me right now. So for me in my day-to-day existence, the way that I cope with my suffering and my pain is I just don't expect almost anything of God."

Are any of you there, friend? Have any of you suffered and decided to continue on with God, but the way that you deal with your life right now and your disappointment is you just have decided not to expect anything of God? This is what we read of Sarah in the Old Testament. God promised her a son. She waited years to have the son and no son came. And so she just stopped expecting God to fulfill this promise. She laughed. She mocked when God came along to her after many years in her old age and said: Now I'm going to fulfill the promise to you.

This is what we read of Martha when Jesus told her that he was going to raise her dead brother, Lazarus, from the grave. She said: Yes, Lord, I believe that my brother will be raised from the dead on the last day, in the resurrection of the just. But Jesus corrects her and says: No, Martha, you are going to see your brother alive in this world, in this life.

This is the meaning of the end of the book of Job. God wants you to continue to trust him and believe for his intervention in this life, in your life. What do you get out of the faith? You get God. But you also get God's surprises, God's interventions, God's promises.

Now, maybe your suffering has caused you to have to revise your expectations of life. Maybe what you thought you couldn't live without, God has told you you've got to live without. Maybe what you are pinning your hopes on was something other than God. But do not cope with life through a hollowed out existence, just going through the motions of the Christian faith. Do not cope with life by simply turning your back on the promises of God. God wants you to have

a living, vital, burning expectation of his intervention in this world, in this life. Perhaps it won't be what you've demanded, or what you've craved. But the discovery of God as my ultimate satisfaction and the enjoyment of God's blessing in the land of the living, that's what the end of the book of Job is about.

Where is God when we suffer? He is present with us, sometimes in silence. He is testing us. He is purifying our faith, bringing us to a place of humility. He searches our motives, purifying our hearts regarding what we're really after, and calling us to continue to have big expectations of him as long as we live. Let's pray.

Where is God When I Suffer?

Rich Nathan

July 17-18, 2004

Where is God When Life is Hard 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 (John 9:1-3)

B. God Is Not Good (Job 9:21-24)

C. God Is Not Powerful

D. God Does Not Exist (Psalm 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?

1. With God (Job 42:5)

2. With Hope For This Life (Job 42:10-17)