

Nokesville UMC Sunday Worship
October 10, 2021
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Why Do We Suffer?
Job 23:1-9

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If we pay attention to whether Job was a historical figure or whether the book of Job is a narrative based on a true story, we may stand on a false start line. Think about it! How could a man leave a record about dialogues between God and Satan? With the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, the book of Job is categorized as a book of wisdom in the Old Testament, which means to give sacred wisdom about God to its readers. But we should be in the same boat that the book of Job was written by an ancient Jewish person under ancient Jewish worldviews. Thus, his understanding about God could be somewhat different from our (Christian) understanding about God. If you agree with me on this point, now we are on the same page and I can start today's sermon.

The book of Job tosses us a core question about our life. "Why do we suffer?" Using Satan, the author of Job might have wanted to claim that our suffering is a test of our faith in God. Here is a dialogue between God and Satan. Satan said, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face" (Job 1:9-11).

As Satan requested, God took away what Job had on-by-one—his sheep, camels, and servants first; his sons and daughters next and finally his physical health. His wife cursed Job and left him. Job had nothing left except his ill body. In spite of all his loss and distress, nevertheless, Job never lost his faith. So, what do you think? As the Satan said, is suffering or hardship that we go through in the past or present a test of our faith to check whether we keep our faith in the midst of our suffering?

The author also brings out three close friends of Job—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Using the three friends, the author of Job might have wanted to claim that our suffering is a result of our sin. In chapters 3 through 37, the three friends keep insisting Job's sins before God, and Job keeps insisting his innocence. Eliphaz claims, "Is it for your piety that he [God] reproves you, and enters into judgment with you? Is not your wickedness great? There is no end to your iniquities" (22:4-5). Bildad claims, "If you will seek God and make supplication to the Almighty...surely then he [God] will rouse himself for you and restore you to your rightful place" (8:5-6). And Zophar reprimanded Job saying, "For you say, 'My conduct is pure, and I am clean in God's sight'" (11:4). So, what do you think? As the three friends said, is suffering or hardship that we go through in the past or present a result of our sin?

Job must have been tired of meaningless discussion with his friends. Think about him. He lost everything. His children died, and his wife left him. The only thing left was his ill body. In this situation, his friends living far from him visited to console and encourage him. When Job first saw his three friends, he must have been glad and comforted by their visit. But rather than consolation and encouragement, his mind and heart became disturbed and disappointed. In today's passage, Job sang the blues:

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"Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me" (23:2-5).

Job believed that he faithfully served God, and he had kept his way and not turned aside from God. He never departed from God's commandments and treasured them in his mouth. That was why Job was not able to understand what was happening to him. Job wanted to see God and argue the reasons. But he could not find God:

"If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right but I cannot see him" (vv. 8-9).

Like us, like Father Rodrigues in the movie "Silence," Job experienced God's complete silence in the midst of his suffering. He asked why he suffered, but God kept silent. He tried to find God everywhere, but God seemed to hide Himself from Job.

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Please allow me to share my personal story with you. When I was a high school senior in Korea, I was a little tense and stressed about the upcoming Korean SAT, which was held once a year. However, I never missed worship on Sundays and early morning prayer meetings during weekdays. On weekends, I did my best for the youth activities in the church. I thought I was faithful enough. One day, when I returned home from school, nobody was at home. Later in the evening, I heard from my father that my mother fainted from a stroke and was moved to the ER. After she finished her surgery, I went to see my mother in the intensive care unit. I took her hand, but her hands were tied on the bed frame, and she was still unconscious.

As an 18-year-old boy, I was not able to understand and accept what was happening to my mother and to me. I thought I did my best to please God, but what I got back was my mother on the verge of death. I thought of Job and tried to find God to ask the reasons and to ask Him about my mother's recovery. But He kept silent to me. I cried out, and complained and intimidated Him saying, "I will leave you if You don't answer me." But I did not find any reason for the suffering coming to my mother and to me. For a couple months until my mother went back home, I had a hard time in my mind and spirit.

When I saw my father, he was in the hospital bed in the intensive care unit. He was intubated; his two hands were tied to the bed frame; and 4-5 monitors were connected to him. He opened his eyes for a moment, hopefully he perceived me, but shortly he closed his eyes and fell into a deep sleep. Due to the pandemic, only one designated family member for just twenty minutes a day was allowed. I saw him for three days, and on the fourth day about 4 o'clock in the morning, we got a phone call from the intensive care unit. We ran to the hospital and made farewells and promised to see him again in the heaven. About two months ago, my father behaved like an ordinary man in his mid-seventies. And a month later, he returned to his heavenly home. He wanted to visit our church, meet you, and bless his pastor son. Let me introduce my father. (photo).

As a 43-year-old man, I still do not know why we suffer. Because of a test? Because of sin? Because of a broken world? Or any other reason? I don't know. But what I realized from my father's death is this: through the tears from people who joined the visitation and the funeral service, I saw the tears from God. Through the warm words of consolation, God consoled me and my family. Through people who sat and remained next to me without saying anything, I felt God was next to me. Through your warm hugs, I felt God embraced me. And through your chatter and laughter in the Narthex and the parking lot after worship, I imagined my father being reunited with his father and mother and having joyful time with them and with our Lord. Why do we suffer? I don't know. But instead of spending time to find out the reasons of our suffering, God may want us to realize that God still works through others when we suffer and through us when others suffer.

When we go forward or backward, we feel we cannot perceive God. On the left or right, we feel we cannot behold Him. But it may be wrong. We just did not perceive or behold Him, but God was, is, and will be there with us. Amen.