

God *and* Human Suffering



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Rom. 1:18–20; Job 12:7–10; Rev. 4:11; Col. 1:16, 17; Matt. 6:34; Job 10:8–12; Rom. 3:1–4.*

Memory Text: “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (*Matthew 6:34, NKJV*).

Unlike every other book of the Bible, the book of Job is completely removed from the context of the land and people of Israel. From Genesis, with the promise to Abram that the Lord will “make of thee a great nation” (*Gen. 12:2*), to Revelation, which describes “the holy city,” Jerusalem (*Rev. 22:19*), in some way, directly or indirectly, the context of Israel and its covenant relationship with God helps shape each book.

In Job there is nothing of that, not even the seminal event in ancient Israelite history, the Exodus. The most immediate reason is that Moses wrote Job in Midian, along with Genesis (see also *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1140); the Exodus had not happened yet, which explains why it’s not mentioned.

But perhaps there’s another even more important reason. One of the key themes of Job, human suffering, is universal. It’s not limited to any one people or time. Jew or Gentile, we all know something of Job’s woes, of the pain of existence in a fallen world. However unique his pain, Job represents us all in our sufferings.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 22.

God in Nature

Read Romans 1:18–20. What is Paul saying here?

What a powerful few sentences. Enough of the reality and existence of God is revealed through “what has been made” (*NASB*), that is, through the created world, that people will be “without excuse” (*NASB*) for their unbelief. Paul is saying that from the Creation alone, humans can learn enough about the existence and nature of God that they can justly be condemned on the day of judgment.

No question, the natural world does reveal much to us about the existence of God. Modern science, too, has revealed to us details about the marvels of Creation that our ancestors, even just 300 years ago, much less 3,000 years ago, could not even have begun to imagine. There’s an interesting irony here, as well: the more complexity science finds in life, the less likely become the means science claims for its origin—that of accident and chance. A smartphone, for instance, which looks designed, acts designed, reveals design both inside and out, and works only through design is, of course, designed. But a human being, who looks designed, acts designed, reveals design both inside and out, and works only through design is, we are assured, a product of pure chance alone. Sadly, many people are deceived into believing such claims.

Read Job 12:7–10. How do the words here reflect the idea presented in Romans 1:18–20?

Here, too, we are told that the reality of God is seen in the created world. Though, especially in its fallen state, nature doesn’t reveal the full character of God, it certainly reveals His creative power, and aspects of His goodness, as well.

What things in nature especially talk to you about the power and goodness of God? How can you learn to draw strength and encouragement from the message it gives you?

Nothing Came From Itself

There are many good and powerful arguments in favor of God’s existence. Besides the testimony of the created world, there’s also what’s called the cosmological argument. Basically, it’s the idea that nothing came from itself and that nothing created itself. Instead, whatever was created was created by something else before it, and whatever created that had to be created by something else before it. And this goes on and on until we stop at something uncreated, something that had always existed, something that never was not in existence. And who else would that be but the God depicted in Scripture?

What do the following texts teach us about the origin of all things?

Rev. 4:11 _____

Col. 1:16, 17 _____

John 1:1–3 _____

These texts teach what is really the most logical explanation for the Creation—an eternally existing God. Some thinkers, utterly opposed to the idea of God, have come up with an alternative suggestion. Instead of an all-powerful and eternal God creating the universe, we are told that “nothing” created it. Even such a famous scientist as Stephen Hawking, who now occupies the chair that Isaac Newton once held, argues that “nothing” created the universe.

“Because there is a law like gravity the universe can and will create itself from nothing.”—Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Random House, 2010), p. 180.

Though Hawking surely has plenty of deep and complicated math to describe his idea, one has to wonder: here we are, a good 400 years since the beginning of the scientific revolution, and one of the world’s best scientists is arguing that the universe and all that’s in it came *from nothing*? Error is error, even when spoken by a great scientist.

In this context, read 1 Corinthians 3:19. Why is it always so important for Christians to keep this truth before us?

The Earliest of Books

Despite the hype of those who don't believe in God, those who believe in God have many good reasons for their belief. However, there's been one perennial problem that many have used through the ages to justify their disbelief, and that is the problem of human suffering and evil. How can God be all-good, all-loving, and all-powerful, and evil exist? This has been and remains a stumbling block to many. And also, if we are honest, what believer in God, what person who has tasted and experienced the reality of God and His love, hasn't struggled at times with that question?

How interesting, then, that Ellen G. White also taught what Jewish tradition teaches: that Moses wrote Job in Midian. "The long years amid desert solitudes were not lost. Not only was Moses gaining a preparation for the great work before him, but during this time, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he wrote the book of Genesis and also the book of Job, which would be read with the deepest interest by the people of God until the close of time."—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1140.

What this tells us is that of the first two books of the Bible ever penned, one of them, Job, deals with the universal issue of human pain and suffering. That is, God knew that this would be a big question for humans, and thus, right from the start, in the Word, He had Moses pen the story of Job. God let us know, early on, that we are not left alone in our pain and suffering but that He is there, He knows all about it, and we can have the hope that He will make it right in the end.

What do the following texts teach us about the reality of evil? *Matt. 6:34, John 16:33, Dan. 12:1, Matt. 24:7.*

However understandable the argument from evil against the existence of God, in light of the Scriptures it makes no sense. Though the Bible teaches the reality of an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving God, it also teaches the reality of evil, of human suffering and woe. Evil is not an excuse to disbelieve in God. In fact, a cursory reading of the book of Job shows that even amid his utter despondency, Job never questioned the existence of God. The question instead, and a valid one, is, Why are these things happening to him?

It's only natural to have questions about the evil we see. How can we learn to trust in the goodness of God despite that evil?

The Dilemma

Read the following texts in Job. What issue is Job wrestling with? What question does he not ask? *Job 6:4–8, Job 9:1–12.*

As stated in yesterday's study, the issue of God's existence never came up in the book of Job. Instead, the question was, Why was Job going through these trials? And, considering all that happened to him, it certainly was a fair question, especially because he believed in God.

If, for example, someone was an atheist and trials were to come, the answer about why could be relatively simple and straightforward to him or her. We live in a meaningless and purposeless world that cares nothing about us. Thus, amid the harsh and cold and uncaring natural forces around us, we sometimes are the victims of trials that serve no purpose. How could they? If life itself serves no purpose, then the trials that accompany that life must be just as meaningless.

While many might find this answer unsatisfying and hopeless, it certainly makes sense given the premise, which is that there is no God. On the other hand, for someone like Job, the dilemma is different.

Read Job 10:8–12. How do these texts help us to understand the terrible questions that Job is wrestling with?

Yes, the question that Job is wrestling with is the same one that most believers in God have wrestled with and still do wrestle with: If God exists, a good and loving God, why do humans suffer the things that they do? Why do even "good" people, such as Job, go through calamities and trials that so often seem to produce nothing of value? Again, if the universe were godless, the answer would be that this is simply what it means to live in a purely materialistic cosmos in which human beings are merely the accidental by-products of atoms and molecules.

Job knew better than that. We do, too; hence, the dilemma.

Theodicy

Read Romans 3:1–4. Though the immediate context is the unfaithfulness of some of God’s covenant people, what is the bigger issue that Paul is talking about here? What is Paul saying about God?

Quoting Psalm 51:4, Paul talks about how the Lord Himself will “be justified in your words and will prevail when you are judged” (*Rom. 3:4, NET*). The idea being presented is a motif that appears in various places in the Scriptures. It’s called theodicy, and it is the question of understanding the goodness of God in the face of evil. It’s the age-old question that we have been looking at all week. In fact, the whole great controversy itself is really a theodicy. Before humans, before angels, before the whole universe, the goodness of God will be revealed despite the evil that unfolds in the world.

“Every question of truth and error in the long-standing controversy has now been made plain. The results of rebellion, the fruits of setting aside the divine statutes, have been laid open to the view of all created intelligences. The working out of Satan’s rule in contrast with the government of God has been presented to the whole universe. Satan’s own works have condemned him. God’s wisdom, His justice, and His goodness stand fully vindicated. It is seen that all His dealings in the great controversy have been conducted with respect to the eternal good of His people and the good of all the worlds that He has created.” —Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 670, 671.

However hard it might be for us now to understand, immersed as we are in a world of sin and suffering (and if it’s hard for us, imagine what Job must have thought), when it is all over we will be able to see the goodness and justice and love and fairness of God in all His dealings with humanity, with Satan, and with sin. This doesn’t mean that everything that happens in the world is good; clearly it’s not. It means only that God is dealing with it in the best way possible, and then when this terrible experience with sin is over, we will be able to shout: “ ‘Great and marvelous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints!’ ” (*Rev. 15:3, NKJV*).

Why is it so important to be praising God, even now, even amid the trials that seem so hard to bear?

Further Thought: Christian writer and apologist C. S. Lewis wrote a book talking about the death of his wife and his struggle to come to terms with that death. In it he wrote, “Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not ‘So there’s no God after all,’ but ‘So this is what God’s really like. Deceive yourself no longer.’ ”—*A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), pp. 6, 7. This, too, is the question that Job himself struggled with. As we saw, he never doubted God’s existence; what he struggled with was the question of the character of God. Job had faithfully served the Lord. Job had been a “good” man. Therefore he knew that he did not deserve the things that were happening to him. Thus, he was asking the question that so many people who believe in God ask amid tragedies: *What is God really like?* And is this not what the great controversy is really about? The question is not about God’s existence but about His character. And though so much is involved in resolving the great controversy, there’s no question that the death of Jesus on the cross, where the Son of God had “given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma” (*Eph. 5:2, NKJV*), more than anything else revealed to the cosmos the true character of our Creator. The Cross shows us that God is a God in whom we can all trust.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Dwell on the question of suffering for those who don’t believe in God. As we saw, they don’t have to struggle with the same questions that believers in God do when facing tragedy. On the other hand, what hope can they have of ever getting answers, of ever finding resolution? Imagine going through all that we go through here in this world and then to believe that it all ends in the grave, with nothing beyond. No wonder so many unbelievers despair of life or of even finding any meaning to life. Secular literature is filled with their exclamations and protests about how meaningless it all is. How can we, then, even amid our sorrows here, draw hope from our faith, despite the difficult questions that remain?
- 2 Why is it so important for us, right now, to dwell on the Cross, the most powerful revelation we have of God’s love and of what God is like? When we are engulfed by sorrow, by tragedy, by inexplicable evil, what does the Cross tell us about the character of God? When we keep the reality of the Cross always before us, what hope can we draw for ourselves for the ultimate outcome of whatever we face now?

Filling the Emptiness: Part 2

After several weeks of deception, Elena realized that she was telling lies in order to worship God, and that wouldn't be acceptable to Him. She decided to be truthful and accept the consequences.

But her father already suspected what she was doing. He watched her enter the widow's house, then leave a half hour later. He went next door and asked for his daughter. The widow told him she had left, but she would return in a half hour. But that night Elena was so deeply touched as the speaker described how Jesus suffered for humanity that she couldn't tear herself away before the service ended.

On her way home she thought, *If God suffered so much for me, maybe I will have to suffer for Him, too. I will be faithful and look to Jesus for strength.* She had no idea how soon her suffering would begin.

She returned to the widow's home overjoyed by what she had heard. But the widow warned her, "Be careful; your father is angry."

She found her father waiting for her at home. He yelled at her, demanding to know where she had been.

"I've been at the church," she said. "I liked it very much."

"You won't go to that church again!" he yelled. "You will have nothing to do with Seventh-day Adventists ever again!" He went to her room and gathered all her religious books and tore them up. Then he threw them on a pile in the yard and burned them.

Her father tried every means he knew to convince Elena to stop this "nonsense." But Elena had seen God's better way and refused to disobey Him. When she told her father this, he shouted, "I would rather kill you than have a daughter who disobeys me! You are no longer my daughter!"

"OK," she said. "If you won't let me be your daughter, then I will be the daughter of God!"

One Sabbath, Elena awoke and found everyone sleeping. She decided to go to church in spite of her father's threats to beat her. As she prepared to leave the house, he saw her. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"To the Adventist church," she answered.

"OK," he said calmly. "But don't stay long."

Later, Elena's father saw her come home and asked, "Who said you could go to the church?"

"You did," Elena said.

"When?" he asked, confused.

"This morning. Don't you remember?"

The tension between Elena and her father made it difficult for her to remain in the home. But Elena had nowhere else to go.

To be continued in next week's Inside Story.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Texts:** *Job 10:8–12, Romans 3:1–4, and Colossians 1:16, 17*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Observe how both created nature and created beings point to the fact that there is a Creator who is in control of the universe.

Feel: Experience the ultimate revelation of God’s character as He sent His Son to die on the cross for our sins.

Do: Determine not to ask “Why, God?” the next time suffering comes to him or her, but “What for, God?”

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: God in Nature

- Ⓐ What is there in nature that tells us about a loving Creator?
- Ⓑ What limitations are there to what nature can tell us about a loving Creator? Where can we find out more about Him?

II. Feel: God on the Cross

- Ⓐ Why is the question of a loving God and human suffering resolved through Christ’s death on the cross?
- Ⓑ How did Job experience a resolution to his questions about the character of God?

III. Do: Seeing God in Our Suffering

- Ⓐ What is our usual reaction when suffering comes our way?
- Ⓑ How can we move beyond our usual reaction when we face pain and suffering in our lives?

► **Summary:** The character of God lies at the center of the great controversy and also behind most questions of human suffering. There will come a point in the history of this planet, and hopefully also in our own lives, when praise will be given to God for His immeasurable love, even if not all our questions are answered on this side of eternity.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Romans 1:18–20*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Why do bad things happen to good people? This perennial and universal question rings from Job’s time down through history and is dealt with from a variety of perspectives. Yet, the real question is not just about suffering but also about the God who allows this suffering. Yet, a look at creation and nature reveals a God of love who has sent His Son to die for the sins of humanity. This is the true perspective from which all questions may find their answer.

Just for Teachers: The one certain thing about human suffering is that, even if we have not yet experienced it, we are sure to experience it during our lifetime. At some point, the big question is going to be asked: How can a loving God allow such suffering, especially if it happens to good people (as if the fact of its happening to bad people would make it less difficult to understand!). The subject also provides a constant flow of arguments from skeptics who deny the reality of a (loving) God and who often engage believers with puzzling questions to which there are no easy answers. It is important in this opening discussion not only to listen to your students’ own experiences of suffering and their conversations with skeptics but to also make sure that the lesson moves beyond the “why” questions.

Opening Discussion: Listen to the words of a good friend who lost her daughter to cancer (names and other details are changed): “The trunk lid fell with cruel finality. I could still see the light-colored pine coffin through the rear window, but then the undertaker started the engine and drove off. Gone. My child is gone! My glasses misted up from the tears. It hurt so much—as if I had been cut in half. Even though I had known for months that this moment would eventually come, even though I had nodded when the undertaker asked, ‘May I close the coffin now?’, even though my mind had long ago agreed when Andrea prayed, ‘Lord, let me die, I cannot fight anymore,’ even though I was relieved that she no longer needed to suffer pain and never again had to fear another test result—my heart cried, ‘No! It’s so unfair! She is still so young! I wish I could have died in her place!’ Andrea had been only 25 years old when her struggle with cancer ended.”

This is by no means a unique story, and, to be sure, all of us can substitute our own experiences. How can we relate the concept of a loving God to the incomprehensible suffering that we experience in our lives?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Job 6:4–10 expresses the deep pain that Job feels. Far from simply being a portrayal of Job’s mental frustrations in an ongoing intellectual and theological dispute that precludes any personal involvement, this passage depicts Job’s experience of deep existential agony. He describes God as a warrior (*Job 6:4*), but not as the warrior who defends His people, as in other texts of the Old Testament (for example, *Ps. 18:29–42*). This time God’s arrows have pierced His faithful servant Job, and the pain he is experiencing leads him to ask God to “crush me” (*Job 6:9, NKJV*). He is looking for some kind of resolution, either positive or negative, but he cannot continue to live in the suspense of not being able to understand God’s actions. This echoes how other biblical writers have approached this subject (compare *Ps. 38:2, 88:13–18, 120:4*), which has a universal and timeless ring to it.

Bible Commentary

Suffering is indeed a universal and timeless topic. The book of Job engages it in a way that is still relevant, even after 3,500 years of history filled with personal and collective suffering. It is important to look at the historical background of the book and to understand how the question of God and suffering has been viewed and expressed from Creation to the end of time.

I. Historical Background of the Book (*Review Job 1:1; Ezekiel 14:14, 20; and James 5:11 with the class.*)

Most commentators agree that it is difficult to pinpoint the time and place that the book of Job was written. Ellen G. White mentions that Moses wrote the book of Job during his sojourn in Midian, sometime between 1490 and 1450 B.C., before the exodus from Egypt took place. Rabbinic tradition in the Talmud also suggests Moses as the author (*Tractate Baba Bathra 14b*).

However, the story itself could possibly have been much older, and some have connected it with the patriarchal period and the time of Abraham (around 2000 B.C.). The reference to the land of Uz in Job 1:1 has been connected to Lamentations 4:21, in which Jeremiah refers to Uz in parallelism to Edom. The fauna and flora of Edom reflect the imagery used in the book of Job; for example, the mining activities described in Job 28:1–11, which use five different words for gold and thirteen different terms for precious gems and metals. Recent archaeological surveys have

shown at least thirteen copper mines in the region of Khirbat en-Nahas, which lies southeast of the Dead Sea in modern Jordan, the ancient Edom.

Some have also suggested that Job was not a historical person at all and that the book is more a literary wisdom composition than a historical account. While the book is definitely highly literary and poetic in character, there are other biblical authors who refer to Job as a historical character (*compare Ezek. 14:14, 20; James 5:11*), more evidence that points to the historicity of the man Job. Nevertheless, geographical and temporal references are sparse throughout the book, resulting in a work with a strong universal and timeless message. At the same time, it is comforting to know that Job was a real person who suffered as many of us do.

II. General and Special Revelation (*Review Job 12:8–10; Colossians 1:16, 17; and Romans 1:18–20 with the class.*)

Satan’s attack on Job is really directed against the character of God. This contention lies at the heart of the great controversy. Resolving the conflict over God’s character must be rooted in the knowledge of God, derived from what He has revealed about Himself, not through what Satan has made Him out to be.

We usually frame our understanding of both general (or natural) and special revelation in this larger context of knowing God. Both forms of revelation are present in the book of Job. There is a possibility for every person to know about God through nature (*Rom. 1:18–20*). Either knowing about God or acknowledging His existence does not necessarily mean knowing Him personally. But what we see in nature points to Him as Creator. Paul in Romans goes on to speak about a basic morality that God has put into humankind that is reflected in the natural order (*Rom. 2:14, 15*). However, a sinful world and a sinful human nature have obscured this general knowledge of God and basic morality so that a special revelation is needed. God has revealed Himself in His Word, and the most complete revelation of God can be found in Christ, who is the incarnated *logos* (“Word”) of God (*compare John 1:1–3*). Both these aspects, general and special revelation, are found in the book of Job. While general revelation points to God (*Job 12:7–10*), it can, nevertheless, answer Job’s questions satisfactorily. But only God’s special revelation at the end of the book—His direct words to Job—finally provides true answers (*Job 38–41*).

Consider This: Define general and special revelation. How do they deepen our understanding of who God is?

III. Theodicy in History (*Review Job 10:8–12 with the class.*)

Theodicy is the fundamental question of why a good God can allow evil to happen. It has puzzled students of the Bible for as long as the Bible has

existed, although the term *theodicy* is attributed to the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (1710). We talk of Augustinian, Irenaean, Origenian, and other theodicies, which in the final analysis are attempts to vindicate God from a human philosophical and rationalist perspective. Maybe, though, God does not need our attempts at vindication. Rather, His revelations in the book of Job and beyond are sufficient to point to a loving God who vindicates Job rather than being vindicated.

Consider This: In what ways, if any, have you struggled with the concept of theodicy? What has been your answer to the questions it poses? How does the Cross fit in with any theodicy?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: The big question of human suffering and God’s character has very practical implications in our lives. It is more than just a theological or philosophical inquiry.

Thought/Application Questions:

- ❶ Think of a time of suffering in your life when you may have felt bitter toward God. How can you get rid of those bitter feelings in your relationship with Him?
- ❷ What about bitter feelings toward others? How have you felt unjustly treated? As a consequence, in what ways are you harboring bitter feelings toward those who hurt you? What can you do to resolve those feelings of hurt and resentment and, instead, nurture healing and renewal?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: What kind of God are we serving? We need to be conscious of our images of God, because how we picture God is how we will portray Him to others.

Class/Individual Activities:

- ❶ During the week, think about your favorite image of God in the Bible, perhaps a favorite story or a favorite metaphor for God (God as a shepherd, rock, fortress, and so on).
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- ❷ Share your favorite image of God with the class.
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