

Where is God?

Struggles with Suffering in Job's Story

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Struggles with Suffering in Job's Story

Description: People suffer all around us, every day. What's more is that many people suffer and they don't appear to deserve it. Their kids die. They get diseases. Spouses are killed in car accidents. If God created the world, and God is good, then why does apparently senseless suffering occur? This series of conversation takes up this question as it's engaged in Job's story.

Purpose: To encourage the faith of people as they suffer. To help people grapple with the mystery of suffering. To inspire people to trust God even when there are no easy answers to their misery.

Calendar: This series of conversation corresponds when the Lenten season of the Christian calendar, which focuses on the sufferings of Jesus as he was rejected by the religious leaders of the day and hung on a cross to die.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Text</u>
March 1	Job's Story	Job 1:1-2:13
March 8	Letting God Have It (Worship Gath.)	Job 3:1-26
March 15	Blessed are the Wicked	Job 19:1-20:29
March 22	Agents of Comfort	Job 2:11-13, 8:1-22
March 29	Encountering God	Job 38:1-42:17
April 5	The Second Job (Holy Week)	Matt. 26:36-27:56

Where is God?

Job's Story

Communion

- Text: 1 Peter 3:17-18: *It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.*
- Thought: Jesus suffered for doing a good thing – he suffered for us, to bring us to God.
- Be sure to describe what communion is and to give an 'out' to any who would rather not participate
- Pray
- Encourage participants to share highs / lows from the previous week with each other.

Conversation

- Question: Imagine that in an instant you lose everything—your job, your money and your family. How would you react? What would you do?
- We're beginning a series of conversations called "Where is God?" that deals with the mystery of suffering in the world. The story of Job will be the centerpiece of our conversations.
- It connects with the season of Lent, in the Christian calendar, when the followers of Jesus identify with the sufferings of Jesus that culminate in his death on the cross.
- Tonight we'll start with the beginning of Job's story in Job 1-2.
- Read Job 1:1-2:13. (Suggestion: read the role of the narrator and appoint readers for the five other roles in the story: 1) Job; 2) the Satan (or Accuser); 3) the Lord; 4) the four messengers; and 5) Job's wife.)
- Question: What does this story say about God?
- [One thought: God is responsible for Job's innocent suffering...gulp.]
- Question: What does this story say about the nature of suffering?
- [Couple thoughts: Sometimes suffering happens to people who don't deserve it. Sometimes suffering happens because God is testing us.]
- Question: The Satan's question is "Does Job fear (=love) God for nothing?" Examine your heart: how would you answer this question for yourself?
- [Text note: incidentally, "Satan" in this text is like a CIA agent who does covert ops for God rather than the enemy of God. The word Satan is not used as a proper name but as a title: "the Satan," which means "accuser."]
- Question: What would it look like for you to respond with Job's faith in the midst of your present circumstances?

Response

- Song suggestion: Blessed Be Your Name
- Pray

Empty Chair

- Explain the empty chair metaphor.
- Facilitate a time of prayer in which participants can pray a one-sentence prayer for someone in their life who is suffering and who they might comfort.

Where is God?

Letting God Have It

Communion

- Text: Mark 16:33-34: *At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").* (cf. Psalm 22:1, a well known lament psalm which begins with the same words.)
- Thought: Jesus felt forsaken by God and lamented as he hung on the cross for our sake.
- Be sure to describe what communion is and to give an 'out' to any who would rather not participate
- Pray
- Encourage participants to share highs / lows from the previous week with each other.

Conversation

- Question: Share a time when you really let somebody have it.
- We're in a series of conversations called "Where is God?" that deals with the mystery of suffering in the world. The story of Job is the centerpiece of our conversations.
- It connects with the season of Lent, in the Christian calendar, when the followers of Jesus identify with the sufferings of Jesus that culminate in his death on the cross.
- Tonight we're looking at Job's response to God in Job 3.
- Explain: Job has just lost everything – his kids, his wealth, his physical health. He has no idea why it's happened to him. His first response is to praise God (1:21). His second response, in chapter 3, is a bit different.
- Read Job 3:1-26 (page 347).
- Question: Is Job out of line to respond this way to God? Why or why not?
- Read Psalm 13:1-6 (page 373).
- Question: What similarities do you see between Job's response and the Psalmist's here?
- [Text note: Truth is, almost 60% of the psalms – Israel's worship songs– are lament psalms.]
- Question: How might lament, such as Job's and the Psalmist's, be an expression of faith rather than the absence of it?
- [Why would a person address God in the first place if he didn't believe God could do something about it? Faith is inherent to voicing such complaints.]
- Question: What is lamentable in your life? (Suggestion: break out into groups of 2-3 to talk about this question; then practice praying prayers of lament together about your circumstances.)

Response

- Song suggestion: All Who Are Thirsty
- Pray that participants will encounter God in the midst of their suffering

Empty Chair

- Question: who is someone in the orbit of your life that is hurting this week?
- Explain the empty chair metaphor.
- Facilitate a time of prayer in which participants can pray a one-sentence prayer for someone in their life who is suffering and who they might comfort.

Where is God?

Blessed are the Wicked

Communion

- Text: Mark 8:31-33 (690)
- Thought: Sometimes there is unexpected blessing in suffering. It didn't seem appropriate to Peter that the Messiah should suffer and be killed. Jesus rebuked him because God intended to work in Jesus' suffering and death to bless the world.
- Be sure to describe what communion is and to give an 'out' to any who would rather not participate
- Pray
- Encourage participants to share highs / lows from the previous week with each other.

Conversation

- Question: Think of a person you know who is faithful to God but would not appear to many to be blessed by God.
- We're in a series of conversations called "Where is God?" that deals with the mystery of suffering in the world. The story of Job is the centerpiece of our conversations.
- Tonight we're looking at an exchange between Job and his friends in Job 19-20.
- Explain: To give context to this text, Job is a good man who has just lost everything – his kids, his wealth, his physical health. He has no idea why it's happened to him. His friends think he's to blame.
- Read Job 19-20 (355-356). [Suggestion: have one person read Job's part (19) and another Zophar's part (20).]
- Question: What assumptions do Zophar and company make about Job and the nature of reality?
- [Particularly that the wicked are always cursed and the righteous are always blessed.]
- Question: Where do you see the assumption that the wicked are always cursed and righteous are always blessed alive in contemporary culture?
- [One place: Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar, other "prosperity preachers" who say obedience translates to wealth and wellbeing 100% of the time.]
- Question: We know from the prologue that Job is righteous yet is not 'blessed' (2:3; 346). What does it say about God that Zophar and company's assumptions are not true?
- Question: How does "religious entitlement" rear its head in your own life – when you feel like God owes you good things because you're seeking him?
- Question: What's one thing you could do to show God you don't want to feel entitled?
- [Perhaps this question will provide a springboard to talk about your house church's next justice initiative.]

Response

- Song suggestion: You Are God Alone
- Pray

Empty Chair

- Explain the empty chair metaphor.
- Facilitate a time of prayer for disconnected friends.

Where is God?

Agents of Comfort

Communion

- Text: 2 Corinthians 1:3-6 (790)
- Thought: God provides us comfort through Christ because Jesus suffered with us at the cross and gave us hope for new life through his resurrection.
- Be sure to describe what communion is and to give an 'out' to any who would rather not participate
- Pray

Conversation

- Question: What instances can you think of when a person *poorly* comforted someone who was suffering?
- We're in a series of conversations called "Where is God?" that deals with the mystery of suffering in the world. The story of Job is the centerpiece of our conversations.
- Tonight we're looking at texts in which Job's friends try to "comfort" him.
- Explain: In this story, Job is a good man who has just lost everything – his kids, his wealth, his physical health. He has no idea why it's happened to him. Job's friends sit with him and try to make sense of what happened, for better or (mostly) for worse.
- Read Job 2:11-13 (346) and 8:1-22 (349-350).
- Question: What's the difference in the friends' approach between the two texts?
- Question: What is Bildad's technique for comforting Job? Why is it a bad technique?
- [Bildad is trying to interpret what's happened to Job—and he's wrong (42:7)! Interpreting is dangerous territory because we never know what's actually happening.]
- Share: John Mark Hicks gives the following advice for what *not* to do when attempting to comfort sufferers: 1) don't interpret; 2) don't rationalize; 3) don't explain.¹
- Question: How does Hicks' advice challenge you?
- Share: Hicks also shares the following guidelines for comforting sufferers: 1) have a healthy sense of inadequacy; 2) be there and be silent; 3) listen to their lament and share their pain; 4) express words of love and sympathy; 5) express your love through action—do something.
- Question: Which of these guidelines would help you be a better comforter? Why?

Response

- Whether we're comforting others or suffering ourselves, let's praise the God who never lets go of us.
- Song suggestion: You Never Let Go
- Pray

Empty Chair

- Question: Who do you know that needs comforting?
- Explain the empty chair metaphor.
- Facilitate a time of prayer for disconnected friends, particularly those who need comforting.

¹ "Providence and Suffering" class handout, Harding Graduate School of Religion, 2005. In his lifetime, Hicks has lost a wife, a son and was left by his second wife.

Where is God?

Encountering God

Communion

- Text: Colossians 2:9-15
- Thought: Humanity encounters God in the person of Jesus, who is the fullness of deity in human form. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, God forgives our sins and defeats the powers of darkness.
- Be sure to describe what communion is and to give an 'out' to any who would rather not participate
- Pray

Conversation

- Question: Think of a time when you got a response you weren't expecting.
- We're in a series of conversations called "Where is God?" that deals with the mystery of suffering in the world. The story of Job is the centerpiece of our conversations.
- Tonight we're looking at Job's encounter with God.
- Explain: In this story, Job is a good man who has just lost everything – his kids, his wealth, his physical health. He has no idea why it's happened to him. Readers know from the prologue that God is testing Job. And God finally answers Job at the end of the story.
- Read Job 38:1-42:17 (365-368). Suggestion: divide the reading into chapters or sections to make it more manageable for several readers.
- Question: In what ways does God's response surprise you?
- Explain: this section of Scripture is among the most ambiguous in the whole Bible. Go figure. Scholars outline at least six potential functions of God's speech: 1) to rebuke Job's pride; 2) to provide Job an experience of God's presence; 3) to show Job moral order in the world; 4) to answer Job's legal accusations; 5) to help Job realize the presence of irreducible chaos in the world; and 6) to offer Job instruction about God and his role in the world.
- Question: Which of these functions resonates with you most? Why?
- Explain: there are five legitimate ways to translate Job's response in 42:6. Go figure. One other way to translate Job's words is: "I retract my words and am comforted concerning the human condition (i.e., dust and ashes)."
- Question: How does each translation (the one above and the one in the TNIV) provide a different perspective on Job's encounter with God?
- Question: What does the ambiguity of chapters 38-42 say about God and the problem of suffering?
- Question: Regardless of how one translates Job's response, it seems clear that Job submits to God. What would need to happen for you to submit to God when you suffer?

Response

- A song of submission to God
- Song suggestion: Be Still My Soul, We Fall Down
- Pray

Empty Chair

- Explain the empty chair metaphor.
- Facilitate a time of prayer to pray that disconnected friends will encounter God.

Where is God?

The Second Job

Suggestion

- Inform participants that communion will be shared as a response to the conversation in connection to Holy Week and the focus on Jesus' death.

Conversation

- Question: Outside of Jesus, who is one person that has suffered for you in a significant way?
- We're at the end of a series of conversations called "Where is God?" that deals with the mystery of suffering in the world. The story of Job has been the centerpiece of our conversations.
- Tonight we're exploring the relationship between Job's story and the Jesus' story.
- Explain: In the story of Job, Job is a good man who has just lost everything – his kids, his wealth, his physical health. He has no idea why it's happened to him. God caused Job to suffer as a way of testing him. Job complains to his friends and has an encounter with God that moves him to submit to God.
- Now let's read part of Jesus' story. Matthew 26:36 – 27:56 (680-682). Suggestion: divide the text into sections according to the nine headings in italics in the TNIV paperback.
- Question: How is Jesus' story like Job's story? How is it different?
- Explain: Early Christians believed that Jesus was not only the Messiah, but also the very embodiment of God in human form.
- Question: What does it say about God that he would, through Jesus, enter into our suffering the way he did?
- Question: How might the story of Jesus' suffering provide comfort for other sufferers?
- Explain: After Jesus rose from the dead, he explained to the first disciples that he had suffered for all of humanity and was punished for the brokenness of the world on the cross.
- Question: How does it impact you to know that Jesus suffered innocently because of you and for you?
- Question: What change does Jesus' story call for in your life?

Communion / Response

- Describe what communion is and to give an 'out' to any who would rather not participate
- Pray, lifting up participant's answers to the last question of conversation
- Song suggestion: Worthy is the Lamb, For All You've Done, When I Think About the Lord

Empty Chair

- Question: Who in your life needs to know Jesus suffers with them and for them?
- Explain the empty chair metaphor.
- Facilitate a time of prayer