

## **Why does God allow Evil and Suffering?**

**Job 2:1-10, Job 42:1-10**

Friends, when our lives are going well, it's very easy to believe in God isn't it? It's very easy to feel love for Him, it's very easy to feel like we can trust Him.

And... we don't need to work too hard to find the motivation to come and worship Him.

But that can all change rather quickly when tragedy comes into our lives or into the lives of others around us, when we witness disaster and devastation in the world, when we come face to face with evil - and watch it succeed.

And looking back over the past year or so – as we have acknowledged at our AGM in the spring – many of us here at Valleyview have suffered trials and challenges in our lives.

And there have been a number of tragedies and disasters that have occurred across our country and our planet – floods, storms, earthquakes and so on...

For the second summer in a row now forest fires have ravaged parts of B.C. and filled our skies with smoke and soot and bringing back terrible memories of the recent destruction of the Fort Mac Murray and Slave Lake fires.

Over in Toronto, a young man walked down Danforth Ave on a July evening and began shooting people – wounding 18 and killing two – a young woman and a little girl.

In Fredericton, New Brunswick, just a few weeks ago - two police officers and two civilians lost their lives in a shoot-out.

And who can forget that fateful Friday night this past April when the greyhound bus carrying the Humboldt Broncos hockey team was hit by a truck, killing 16 of the young players including their coach and critically wounding 13 of them.

And it's important to remember that these are more than just breaking news headlines and trending stories on social media. Each of these tragedies are the real life stories of people who have lost everything they've worked so hard for... people who

have had their lives destroyed, people who have loved ones taken from them...

And maybe you also know of some tragedy that didn't make headline news.

A friend whose son was killed in a work related accident, a family who was torn apart by divorce, a co-worker who discovers they have a terminal disease, a neighbor whose expectation for their new baby is shattered when the baby is born deformed.

When we face all these tragedies and disasters and suffering it makes us feel vulnerable, small, and threatened perhaps? And we begin to realize how easy it would be for our life to be destroyed or irrevocably changed in an instant.

And so we look for some assurance, something or someone who can make us feel safe and secure and fairly confident that such tragedy would not happen to us.

And so perhaps we say... we trust in God. God is in control of everything - and he can protect us from harm and danger and disaster....we'll trust God to look out for us!

And for a few seconds we feel reassured and secured but then we think – my neighbor who just gave birth to a deformed child... she was trusting God.

And a few years back when tornadoes ripped through the Midwest - there were a number of churches that were destroyed...

And I'm certain that many of the families in the US who lost their jobs and houses in the 2008 financial crisis were praying to God to give them work just so they can provide for their families and stay off the street...

And suddenly our security and assurance that we look to God for dissolves underneath us like quicksand and we sink into doubt and a crisis of faith.

We begin to ask the question *“What good is it to believe in God if He does not shelter us from the disasters and tragedies which threaten us?”*

Why does God allow this to happen to people? Why does God allow evil and suffering to prevail? Why did He create a world where such things were possible?

And when our crisis of faith forces us to ask these questions, the answers that we come up with can take us in a number of different directions.

We may start out trying to find a way to reconcile what we know about God, and what we’ve gone through in life so that they somehow seem to fit together.

Maybe we conclude that God wants to prevent evil and suffering from happening – after all we know He is good... but something must be preventing him from doing that.

For example - God has to allow human free will to operate and so we live with the consequences, or God isn’t all-powerful or all-knowing after all – but He’s doing the best He can.

And if these attempts to reconcile don’t work we may conclude that there is no benefit to trusting in God and following Him if He doesn’t pull through for us when it really seems to matter...

We may even go a step further and determine that God doesn’t exist, since a good God would never allow all this to occur, so He’s either not good or He must not be there.

Brothers and sisters, I hope you can see that trying to deal with the anxiety or loss that we feel through these kinds of rationalizing answers doesn’t lead us anywhere good.

However the good news is that the scripture tells us a story that helps us to deal with the feelings of insecurity and anxiety, or loss and pain when we are faced with evil and suffering in our lives and in this world.

So let me tell you about this story. It's a story you may be familiar with about a man named Job.

Now Job was a good person – kind to all, careful to honor God. In fact the scripture says he was *“blameless and upright, He feared God and shunned evil.”* He was also extremely wealthy and was considered to be the greatest man in the land where he lived.

Like I said when we started out, it's easy to love and serve God when life is going well for you - isn't it.

And this is precisely what Satan says to God about Job when God boasts about Job in the heavenly court, and so God – confident in the authenticity and genuineness of Job's love and obedience - gives Satan permission to ruin Job in order to prove Satan wrong, because Satan believes and wants to show God that Job only serves Him out of self-interest.

So Satan causes disasters to befall Job which kill all of his children, steal away his wealth, and destroys his health, and...

causes his wife too nag him in the midst of all of this! And Job has no idea why this has all happened to Him.

But Job stubbornly persists in clinging to his relationship with God. He does not abandon God when for all intents and purposes it feels like God has abandoned him. So Satan is proved wrong.

So friends, we learn here that evil and suffering test our feelings of loyalty to God. How do we know that our loyalty and love for God is nothing more than fair-weather friendship? As Job says *“shall we accept good from God and not trouble?”*

When we face disaster, suffering and evil in our lives it reveals to us the authenticity of our feelings about God. Is it just something we feel or is it real? Suffering and evil reveals this.

Now, friends – It was not an easy experience for Job to stay loyal to God while he was suffering all these things. Having your feelings of loyalty authenticated is miserable – and even

when you know that this is what is happening - it doesn't make it any easier to experience. And often you don't know it, Job certainly didn't...

Now, when these calamities happened to Job there was an added layer of torment. In addition to enduring the loss of his children, wealth and health, he also had to endure God's apparent absence during it all! Not so much as even a get well card from the Almighty for Job.

Friends, when the storms of life blow – the pain can be bearable because you have a sense of God's presence and that gives you peace. God is our rock, our help in times of trouble right?

And friends, even when we are suffering because we are reaping the consequences for some thing we did wrong and God is disciplining us, there's still a measure of peace because we know we are in God's hands.

But suffering disaster, and having God be absent during it all...feeling like He's abandoned us during it - well it is a wonder that Job stayed loyal to God through it at all.

Now maybe you've experience this absence of God's presence in your own life – or perhaps when you observe the evil and suffering rampant in our world – that's when you ask “where is God?” It looks like He's absent, like He's abandoned us.

I certainly feel that contradiction as I stand up and preach every Sunday, about the God who loves us, who acts for us, who saves us – while many of us endure suffering.

God's absence in the midst of evil and suffering is its own particular kind of suffering - isn't it.

And much of the suffering and evil in the world and in our lives looks like this to us because of God's absence – so we can't see anything good coming out of it, and we can't see God doing anything in it.

Not only is it tragic and horrific - it seems pointless and senseless to us. And It's at this point that the "question of why does God allow suffering and evil and where is He in the midst of it all where we might find answers which may be right - but still feel wrong to us.

You see Job's friends witnessed his awful suffering too, just as we see suffering in the world around us. And they try to make sense of this calamity that has befallen him, just as we try to figure out the "why and where" questions as well.

So eventually they speak to Job about his suffering, from what they know to be true of God they are convinced that Job is hiding some secret sin that God is punishing him for.

Because it is correct that God does use consequences to teach us what is right. Psalm 62:12 says "*You reward everyone according to what they have done.*" You reap what you sow.

Job is suffering, so he must have done something, so confess the sin and end the suffering, and God will appear once again.

Now Job would gladly do this, in fact he believes what his friends believe, but He can't figure out what He's done wrong.

And remember, Job has a close relationship with God – so if Job has done something unaware, God should show up and tell him what it is, because Job cannot admit to false guilt or confess something he isn't aware of.

Now, we know Job is not guilty, we know he is suffering because he is associated with God, because he's loyal to God and for this reason God must be absent so that Job's loyalty can be proved authentic, but Job's friends don't know this.

So instead of helping him make sense out of what appears to be meaningless suffering and God's absence, Job's friends are adding insult to injury by applying correct theology to a situation which is beyond their understanding.

So brothers and sisters what we learn from this is that our response to witnessing and experiencing the suffering and evil in this world is not to try and make sense out of it – even if we

know correct things about God and who He is... because even correct facts about God can be wrong if we don't know the context.

We'll end up concluding something wrong, like God's not in control, God's not powerful enough, or God isn't good or God doesn't exist.

All we can do in the face of meaningless suffering and evil is to stay fiercely loyal to God – to trust in Him when everything around us, and maybe even in us, is screaming to give up.

Because friends, while God does not give us the out and out answer as to why He allows evil and suffering to exist and occur and to affect us - He has revealed the context in which they occur in the scriptures.

In Job's story we see there was a bet going on about Job's loyalty, and in the larger story of the Scriptures we see that a perfectly good and harmonious creation is inexplicably distorted and ruptured by evil, BUT instead of simply

abandoning it, or wiping it out and giving up on it, God puts into effect a plan to rid His creation of evil and restore it and renew it.

And it's within this context that we must understand suffering and evil, and when we witness or experience it our response must be to go back and remember the context.

That will help us to stay fiercely loyal to God and hang on in spite of whatever evil we may face or tragedy we may suffer.

And this context, this story of scriptures is so neatly summarized in that famous verse – John 3:16 *“For God so loved the creation that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*

Because when evil and suffering entered into God's good creation so long ago, and God was fully aware of all the horrible implications it would mean for everyone – he knew it would mean natural disasters, genocide, starvation, disease, divorce, death...

But God did not wipe everything out and abandon creation as a bad idea. God loved the creation, God wanted you and I to come into existence – to be born, to know us, to watch us grow and experience us living the life He gave us – in spite of the fact we will be affected by evil and suffering – not only in the form of external tragedies but most intimately through the fact that we are born into our sin.

So He put into effect a plan to save the creation, to save us – he gave his one and only Son, Jesus Christ.

And Jesus entered into this world, he became one of us – and lived in the midst of all the suffering, and evil, and he engaged it. He didn't offer explanations for it, He didn't explain it away...

An example of this is when His disciples pressed Him for an explanation about why a man had been born blind, Jesus respond saying *“Neither this man nor his parents sinned but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”* (John 9:3)

And then Jesus healed him as a sign that God's plan to restore the world and get rid of evil and suffering was on track... because the way Jesus would eventually secure this plan might cause people to think He failed.

You see brothers and sister, Jesus Christ – God incarnate - defeated suffering and evil in this world by allowing them to bring about His death on a cross.

The cross is a symbol of shame and scorn – it was the means to execute the lowest of criminals – pedophiles, abusers, serial killers, and God himself died upon it. This appears to be the ultimate triumph for evil and suffering – but in fact it is the beginning of their end.

Jesus Christ defeated evil and suffering not through an awesome display of power and triumph, but by entering into them and taking the worst they could deal out. That's what the cross symbolizes.

So you see friends, for a Christian the goal isn't to avoid evil or suffering, and we don't believe in God because He can protect

us from disaster, we believe in Him because He has promised that one day there will be no more evil and suffering.

This world will be made new – we need not despair because evil and suffering do not have the last word in this life.

So we stay loyal to God, we stay loyal to Jesus Christ who is making this promise come true and we're willing to face evil and suffer for it!

Friends at the end of Job's story, God vindicates Job's loyalty by instructing him to offer a sacrifice on behalf of his friends who had spoken wrongly about God, so they could be forgiven.

Friends it was Christ's loyalty to God which lead him to offer himself as the sacrifice for the times when we succumb to disloyalty in the face of suffering and evil and thus speak wrongly of God – and we all do it.

Perhaps the Holy Spirit is prompting you to confess that...

Or maybe the Holy Spirit is using the story of Job this morning to help you come to realize that your belief in God is really just an assurance policy – maybe a “blessed assurance” policy – but a policy nonetheless and you need grow beyond self-interest into true covenant loyalty to God.

Or maybe this is prompting a desire to believe in God and love Him because God is God – as Job says in 42:5-6 *“My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”*

Or perhaps you the evil and suffering and loss you've faced in your life has overwhelmed you and you've felt abandoned by God and so you've decided to give up on him – yet somehow you're here in church this morning.

Brothers and sisters - the Holy Spirit wants to use the story of Job this morning to help us to see what is really going on, to point us to the larger context of reality revealed in scripture and reminds us even if we are tempted and have spoken wrongly of God because of the evil and suffering we may see –

even if we may have given up on God - God has never given up on His plans for us, and He has not given us up.

God Himself has endured evil and suffering on a scale we cannot even fathom - just to be able to forgive you and give you eternal life in a world where evil and suffering is no more.

Brothers and sisters - this world and the evil and suffering that exist is not the last word, it is not all that there is, it will not always be this way – God has suffered to make it so!

Believe it, trust in it, stay faithful and loyal because of it.

So brothers and sisters, let me conclude this message by saying I may not be able to give you the ultimate philosophical or theological answer to the question of “why does God allow suffering and evil?”

Nor do the scriptures do not spell out that explanation in chapter and verse...

But it does tell us about what God has been able to accomplish in spite of them - even through them... and what He has done is so amazing that I can rest with not knowing the “why” and I pray the Holy Spirit will give you that peace too.

Because as the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:18 *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”*

So, in the end we discover the question changes from “why evil and suffering?” until “how long until the Kingdom comes?”

So - come Lord Jesus, come quickly!

Amen.