

“Questions for God: Why Do We Suffer?”  
Job 2:1-10, 38:1-7

This is our third week of engaging some difficult questions for God. Each week, I have felt that the question at hand is the hardest but when the following week came, I found myself saying, “I wish I was tackling last week’s question.” Questions are part of life, but the problem comes when our questions are not easily answered. We would rather have clear answers in life. I am always amazed at some of the research people engage in just to answer questions. Here are two examples: How many licks does it take to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop? According to a study conducted at Purdue University, on average, about 252.5. How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood? According to a New York Fish and Wildlife technician who studies woodchucks and did the math, about 700 pounds.

But a lot of the important questions in life don’t have simple or clear answers and the question about innocent suffering is one of those questions. And this is difficult for most of us because answering life’s big questions could give us a sense of control that there is some logic we can understand. Control is one of the big traps of our human experience. We have the illusion that if we could control things, then we would be truly happy. In his book *Job and the Mystery of Suffering*, Richard Rohr writes that “the opposite of love is not really hatred, but *control*.” We even project this need for control onto God and think that God is like us wanting to control everything. But faith is about expanding our ability to live in trust and not in control. Love demands that we trust, especially when it is hard to trust.

And so when it comes to the problem of innocent suffering, we struggle because we can’t find simple answers to satisfy our need for control. The problem of human suffering is an age-old issue that we confront. This issue more than any other issue in human history has been the leading cause for many people to lose their faith in God.

David Hume, the Enlightenment Scottish philosopher writes that, “If God is good, God cannot be omnipotent. If God is omnipotent, God cannot be good.” In his book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins denies the existence of God based on the argument that the level of evil in the world is incompatible with either a good or an omnipotent being such as God, particularly because so much of the evil in the world is either perpetrated or permitted to go unchecked precisely by religious adherents.

In a way, this was the framework of the book of Job in the Bible. It is a book of wisdom with a story that is told to us about a righteous man named Job. The story begins just like many fairy tales begin, “Once upon a time...” “There was once a man in the land of Uz...” with an emphasis on the innocence and goodness of Job. Even the setting of the story is in the land called Uz which in Hebrew means fertile. So, we come to this story expecting good things to happen. But instead, we hear about the plight of Job where his righteousness is tested. He loses his children, his wealth, and his health. By chapter two, Job is confronted with the eternal problem of suffering. His wife even tells him to curse God and die. The image of the heavenly court of this story is very indicative of the

people's understanding of the problem of suffering at the time. We see God sitting in a court-like setting. Satan was an image drawn from the Persian court system. Satan's job was to question every decision that the king made, to ensure that he had thought things through. In that sense, he was an adversary of sorts, but he was simply doing his job. In Job, Satan is not presented as "the Devil," the arch enemy of God. Instead, Satan is presented as a member of the celestial court, one of the "heavenly beings" who attend God and assist in the management of Creation. In fact, in the original Hebrew of the passage, "Satan" is not even a proper name: it is a *title*, bearing a definite article, "the Satan," meaning "the Adversary" or "the Opposition" or even "the Naysayer." So, with this role of the Satan we see that there is no real explanation of the origin of suffering but an attempt to deal with it by using an image that people at the time would have been able to understand. In fact, the book of Job does not end up giving a real explanation of why people suffer. But what it does is negate all the traditional answers that were popular at that time. We see that clearly later on in the arguments between Job and his three friends, who present the traditional view, that Job must have sinned and therefore deserved his suffering. They berate him to confess his sins, although they themselves could not think of what sins he needed to confess. Their worldview said that God always rewarded good behavior and punished bad behavior and there was no exception to that rule.

So how does God respond to the questions raised by Job about innocent suffering? Well, it seems that God answers the questions with more questions. (Read Job 38:1-7) God does not give Job a clear answer, but instead, God questions Job's perspective on God's role in suffering and life. God reframes the question about innocent suffering to enlarge our limited human understandings and need for a logic of cause and effect. In his book *Job and the Mystery of Suffering*, Richard Rohr suggests that (screen) "We will have a problem similar to Job's so long as we picture God as 'the one who does not suffer.' Job didn't know about Jesus, of course, so it's easier to excuse his mistake. But it is amazing that, even after we've seen the incarnation, we Christians fall so readily into the same misconception. The enfleshment and suffering of Jesus is saying that God is apart from the trials of humanity. God is not aloof. God is not a mere spectator. God is participating with us... Our usual definitions of God depict him omnipotent, infinite, perfect in every way. Yet, if the suffering of Jesus is the image and revelation of God the invisible God (Col. 1:5), this is totally at odds with all the other philosophical and theological definitions of a supreme being. Jesus doesn't fit... He basically turned theology upside down. He said, in effect: Who you think God is, God isn't."

The key of faith for Job was not regaining his sense of control or his understanding of the reasons behind his innocent suffering. It was instead about a change in his perspective so that he could focus on his relationship with God instead of trying to control the circumstances of his life.

With this folktale of Job, this wisdom book, the people of ancient Israel were being challenged to grow in their understanding of God. They were invited to let go of their worn-out belief that God punishes people for their sins. In its time, the book of Job was a very radical message about God's love. In his book, *Why God*, Burton Cooper notes

that (screen), “Perhaps the book of Job will not make sense until we see it as turning away from the monarchical image of God and toward an image of God as vulnerable. Our failure to look forward, so to speak, in interpreting Job makes us like Job’s friends who cannot speak rightly about God because they cannot break away from earlier patterns of thinking.”

The book of Job asks some very hard questions of us. When bad things happen in your life and in the world, how do you understand/know/experience God’s presence? Do you blame God? Do you question God’s providence? Do you lose heart? Do you just think that your suffering is a test that you must conquer? When our dreams turn into nightmares, how do we cope or where do we see God? Can you let go of old images/understandings of God?

Kate Bowler, a divinity professor at Duke, who taught classes on the Prosperity Gospel, wrote a book on the prosperity gospel, lived the prosperity Gospel way of life, followed Oprah, believed in thinking positively, and that there is no such thing as luck. At the age of 35 life was going great. She had married her high school sweetheart and had a baby. But then one day she was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer. Through the experiences of battling that cancer...she wrote another book, and this one was quite different. Its title is (screen) *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved*. In it, she writes, “‘Everything happens for a reason.’ The only thing worse than saying this is pretending that you know the reason. I’ve had hundreds of people tell me the reason for my cancer. Because of my sin. Because of my unfaithfulness. Because God is fair. Because God is unfair. Because of my aversion to Brussels sprouts. I mean, no one is short of reasons. So if people tell you this, make sure you are there when they go through the cruelest moments of their lives, and start offering your own. When someone is drowning, the only thing worse than failing to throw them a life preserver is handing them a reason.” She then goes on to say this, “I CAN’T RECONCILE THE way that the world is jolted by events that are wonderful and terrible, the gorgeous and the tragic. Except I am beginning to believe that these opposites do not cancel each other out. I see a middle-aged woman in the waiting room of the cancer clinic, her arms wrapped around the frail frame of her son. She squeezes him tightly, oblivious to the way he looks down at her sheepishly. He laughs after a minute, a hostage to her impervious love. Joy persists somehow and I soak it in. The horror of cancer has made everything seem like it is painted in bright colors. I think the same thoughts again and again: Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard.”

I invite you today as we wrestle with the question of innocent suffering to let go of the need for simple answers and to trust that God is in this struggle with us. God’s love is constant. The temptation to seek logic and control over situations of pain robs us of the opportunity to live in trust and to embrace love in the midst of suffering. Focus your energy on love, especially in times of struggle. That is what Jesus did and that is what God does each and every day.(first service) We will end with a video about the change in perspective which God called Job to. Eye of the beholder video:

<https://vimeo.com/72523738> Amen.

## EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON AND OTHER LIES I'VE LOVED

By Kate Bowler

## APPENDIX 1

ABSOLUTELY NEVER SAY THIS TO PEOPLE EXPERIENCING TERRIBLE TIMES:  
A SHORT LIST

1. "Well, at least. . ."

Whoa. Hold up there. Were you about to make a comparison? At least it's not ... what? Stage V cancer? Don't minimize.

2. "In my long life, I've learned that. . ."

Geez. Do you want a medal? I get it! You lived forever. Well, some people are worried that they won't, or that things are so hard they won't want to. So ease up on the life lessons. Life is a privilege, not a reward.

3. "It's going to get better. I promise."

Well, fairy godmother, that's going to be a tough row to hoe when things go badly.

4. "God needed an angel."

This one takes the cake because (a) it makes God look sadistic and needy and (b) angels are, according to Christian tradition, created from scratch. Not dead people looking for a cameo in *Ghost*. You see how confusing it is when we just pretend that the deceased return to help you find your car keys or make pottery?

5. "Everything happens for a reason."

The only thing worse than saying this is pretending that you know the reason. I've had hundreds of people tell me the reason for my cancer. Because of my sin. Because of my unfaithfulness. Because God is fair. Because God is unfair. Because of my aversion to brussels sprouts. I mean, no one is short of reasons. So if people tell you this, make sure you are there when they go through the cruelest moments of their lives, and start offering your own. When someone is drowning, the only thing worse than failing to throw them a life preserver is handing them a reason.

6. "I've done some research and. . ."

I thought I should listen to my oncologist and my nutritionist and my team of specialists, but it turns out that I should be listening to you. Yes, please, tell me more about the medical secrets that only one flaxseed provider in Orlando knows. Wait, let me get a pen.

7. "*When my aunt had cancer. . .*"

My darling dear, I know you are trying to relate to me. Now you see me and you are reminded that terrible things have happened in the world. But guess what? That is where I live, in the valley of the shadow of death. But now I'm on vacation because I'm not in the hospital or dealing with my mess. Do I have to take my sunglasses off and join you in the saddest journey down memory lane, or do you mind if I finish my mojito?

8. "So how are the treatments going? How are you really?"

This is the toughest one of all. I can hear you trying to understand my world and be on my side. But picture the worst thing that has ever happened to you. Got it? Now try to put it in a sentence. Now say it aloud fifty times a day. Does your head hurt? Do you feel sad? Me too. So let's just see if I want to talk about it today because sometimes I do and sometimes I want a hug and a recap of *American Ninja Warrior*.

APPENDIX 2  
GIVE THIS A GO. SEE HOW IT WORKS:  
A SHORT LIST

1. *“I’d love to bring you a meal this week. Can I email you about it?”*

Oh, thank goodness. I am starving, but mostly I can never figure out something to tell people that I need, even if I need it. But really, bring me anything. Chocolate. A potted plant. A set of weird erasers. I remember the first gift I got that wasn’t about cancer and I was so happy I cried. Send me funny emails filled with You-Tube clips to watch during chemotherapy. Do something that suits your gifts. But most important, *bring me presents!*

2. *“You are a beautiful person.”*

Unless you are of the opposite gender and used to speaking in a creepy windowless-van kind of voice, comments like these go a long way. Everyone wants to know they are doing a good job without feeling like they are learning a lesson. So tell your friend something about his life that you admire without making it feel like a eulogy.

3. *“I am so grateful to hear about how you’re doing and just know that I’m on your team.”*

You mean I don’t have to give you an update? You asked someone else for all the gory details? *Whew*. Great! Now I get to feel like you are both informed and concerned. So don’t gild the lily. What you have said is amazing, so don’t screw it up now by being a Nosy Nellie. Ask a question about any other aspect of life.

4. *“Can I give you a hug?”*

Some of my best moments with people have come with a hug or a hand on the arm. People who are suffering often – not always – feel isolated and want to be touched. Hospitals and big institutions in general tend to treat people like cyborgs or throwaways. So ask if your friend feels up for a hug and give her some sugar.

5. *“Oh, my friend, that sounds so hard.”*

Perhaps the weirdest thing about having something awful happen is the fact that no one wants to hear about it. People tend to want to hear the summary but they don’t usually want to hear it from you. And that is was awful. So simmer down and let them talk for a bit. Be willing to stare down the ugliness and sadness. Life is absurdly hard, and pretending it isn’t is exhausting.

6. \*\*\*\*\*Silence\*\*\*\*\*

The trust is that no one knows what to say. It’s awkward. Pain is awkward. Tragedy is awkward. People’s weird, suffering bodies are awkward. But take the advice of one man who wrote to me with his policy: Show up and shut up.

A FINAL PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT TO SUFFERING PEOPLE:

Just remember that if cancer or divorce or tragedies of all kinds don’t kill you, people’s good intentions will. Take the phrase “but they mean well. . .” as your cue to run screaming from the room. Or demand presents.

You deserve a break.