

“Navigating Suffering”

Job 38-42: Selected Verses, Exodus 20:8-11, Mark 1:35, Psalm 1: Selected Verses

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Prayer for Understanding God of grace, you promised to never break your covenant with us. Amid all the changing words of our generation, speak your words of eternal love. Amen.

All of us go through seasons of loss, grief, and suffering. The book of Job gives guidance to navigate these seasons.

Resist the urge to try and answer, why is there loss, grief, and suffering. Avoid blaming yourself, others, or God. Resist “if only” or “I wish I would have” thinking.

It seems to me that Job suffered more from his desire to know the why behind his suffering than he suffered from his losses. In Job’s quest to answer why he started to doubt that God is love, joyful, and gracious. We cannot control what happens to us in life. We are free to choose our response. God’s answer to Job covers four chapters including: **Job:38-41: Select Phrases. “Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words? Do you know the laws of the universe? Do you still want to argue with the Almighty? You are God’s critic, but do you have the answers?” Job 42: Select Phrases “Then Job replied to the Lord: “I know that you can do anything, and no one can stop you. You asked, ‘Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorance?’ It is I—and I was talking about things I knew nothing about, things far too wonderful for me. I had only heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes. I take back everything I said,”** In times of suffering, resist the urge to answer why, rationalize, and justify.

During times of suffering a good friend is fully present. Silently being with another is a wonderful gift. Be an active listener. Paraphrasing and reflecting back what is said without advice, a desire to fix, or judgement. Often hearing one’s own words and feelings echoed back gives direction and comfort to the one suffering. No one can ever know how another person is feeling, so resist the temptation to say, “I know what you are feeling, or going through, or you must be ...”. Everyone processes and journeys through suffering in a different way and at a different speed. Keep the conversation focused on the people who are in the room. A good friend prepares by emptying their cup of their own stuff, thoughts, and emotions. Often, we live life with full cups. When someone shares most of their sharing spills right off the surface. One is a poor listener if they allow their own feelings and notions of the way the world is and ought to be dominate the conversation. One is a poor listener if they allow their perception of God to dominate the conversation. One needs to empty their cup, so they can make room for what the other is trying to share. Do whatever you need to do to empty your cup, so your time together is all about the other. I imagine I am hiking. I empty out my backpack to Jesus, so I am prepared to fill my backpack with the stuff of the one suffering. After the visit I empty the stuff I received to Jesus in prayer and pick back up my stuff. A good friend actively listens.

Another option is to visualize a trouble tree. The metaphor is told of a carpenter. She had just finished a rough day. A flat tire made her lose an hour of work, her electric saw quit, and her pickup truck refused to start. A friend gave the carpenter a ride home. They traveled in silence. On arriving home, the carpenter invited the friend into her home. As they walked toward the front door, the carpenter paused briefly at a tree, touching the tips of the branches with both hands. When opening the door, the carpenter underwent an amazing transformation. Her tanned face beamed with a smile. She hugged her children and gave her husband a kiss. Afterward she walked her friend to the car. As they passed the tree the friend asked, “What were you doing by the tree before you entered your home?” The carpenter replied, “That is my trouble tree. I cannot help having troubles. However, troubles do not belong in the house with my family. So, I hang my troubles on the tree every night when I come home. Then in the morning I pick them up again.” She paused, “Funny thing is, when I come out in the morning to pick my troubles up, there is not nearly as many as I remember hanging up the night before.” A good friend actively listens.

A great question is what can I do to support you? Sometimes the one suffering is so overwhelmed they are unable to answer. In a compassionate, loving way offer things you are gifted in providing. Would you like me to go for a walk with you? Would you like a meal, your laundry done, something cleaned, yard work, childcare etc.? Would you like me to read scripture, a poem, or a story to you? Would you like me to call someone and tell them about your situation? More great questions are: How is God caring for you? How do you want me to pray for you?

A good friend avoids telling someone what they should feel, what they should do and how they should grieve. A good friend avoids judging another's grieving journey. A good friend listens, echoes back the words and feelings and asks questions so their friend discovers the next step.

If you are the one suffering be open to receiving grace, that is free unconditional gifts. Be bold in asking for help. Be specific. Be blunt and sincere if something is not helpful or if doing the task yourself helps you or if it must be done only in your way. Be bold and sincere in setting boundaries such as, a meal is helpful, however a visit is not so please leave the meal on my doorstep. Let your friend know when it is time to end a visit. Hold onto all that is helpful, let go of anything that is a burden, especially advice or sayings. If they are not helpful, let them go. If someone repeatedly gives you the same unhelpful advice reply, "That is not helping me." A good friend in times of suffering specifically asks for grace.

Job's supposed friends did not listen, instead they lectured and judged. They insisted that Job did something to bring about his suffering. They clung to the false notion that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. God spoke to Job's friends. **Job 42: Select Phrases "I am angry with you for you have not spoken accurately about me. I will not treat you as you deserve, for you have not spoken accurately about me."** Often our loss, grief, and suffering have nothing to do with our choices or the way we live life. God is always with us. God is love, joy, peace, grace, and hope. God will carry us, if necessary, to glorious seasons.

The Israelites were free from slavery in Egypt. On the journey to the Promised Land, the Israelites suffered from what psychology today calls temporal dislocation. Every day was similar for the Israelites, gather manna, eat manna, walk in the wilderness, chores in the wilderness, sleep in a temporary portable structure. The weather, the same hot and dry.

Temporal dislocation is suffering arising from difficulty living in the present, suffering from a lost sense of time and boundaries. Temporal dislocation is an effective means of torture. Captures distort time by making every day similar, changing the length of a day with lights and darkness, and constantly asking about some past event and making promises about the future.

Some of us are suffering from temporal dislocation due to the pandemic. Every day is similar. Our focus shifts from living in the present to longing for the good old days or dreaming of the future. Some are spending most of their time in the house, Zoom meetings, Zoom school, Zoom fellowship, Zoom worship. The boundaries between work, school, family, eating, leisure, hobbies, fun are thin. In these conditions it is easy to lose a sense of time.

I am going to overly simplify things. Please if you are suffering from depression or anxiety seek professional help. Our mental health sometimes needs counseling, therapy, coaching, and medication. Asking for help takes courage and needs support. All of us should strive to support all who are seeking mental health wholeness. As a society we should improve mental health opportunities and affirm those who seek help.

Overly simplify mild temporal dislocation is getting stuck in the past brings depression, getting stuck in the future brings anxiety. Depression and anxiety suck the energy and joy out of the now.

A treatment for temporal dislocation is to have one day a week that is unique. One does different things, in a different place, even if it is just in a different room in the house. I heard of a lady who dressed in her Sunday best for Zoom worship to set that day apart. Now I am not a big clothes person so that would not help me. For me, I have been going on virtual hikes around the world. Be intentional of doing something different, being in a different state of mind, once a week. God explained it to the Israelites and us as follows. **Exodus 20:8-11 NLT "Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest dedicated to the Lord your God. On that day no one in your household may do any work. This includes you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, your livestock, and any foreigners living among you. For in six days the Lord made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything in them; but on the seventh day God rested. That is why the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy."**

Without a different day once a week one can fall into a malaise, languish, and be fragmented and unrooted. Last week we explored how our chief end is to enjoy God forever. A form of worship is enjoying God, maybe for you that is dressing in your best, or hiking, music, art, fishing, games, or something else. Shalom, peace, completeness, wholeness, joy is nourished by setting aside one day a week to be different.

During loss, grief and suffering we often suffer from temporal dislocation. Every day becomes the same as we grieve. Grieving is healthy work that all of us go through to heal. However even during suffering and grief, strive to rest and do something different one day a week. Strive to use the trouble tree for one day, then pick back up your grief. Often a wonderful gift to someone who is grieving is enabling them to do something different one day a week. Perhaps take them on an adventure. Or cover their responsibilities so they can go on adventure. Simple small adventures are helpful, anything that is different.

Jesus models taking this even further. Jesus set aside a few moments each day to be different. Mark explains, **Mark 1:35 NLT “Before daybreak, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray.”** During suffering and grief, take a few moments to meditate, pray, read scripture, journal, draw, make a list of blessings, write a thank you note or physical activity in a different space. Pick one brief easy activity.

Meditative exercises are often helpful for they help us notice what is happening now. Psychologist Ben Bruce writes, “If I were to focus on my breathing right now for an extended period of time, coming back to my point of focus whenever I get distracted by sensations, sounds, smells, sights, and thoughts (of other things, the past and the future), I would deepen into the experience and ‘let go’ of everything else. My own sense of myself and the world within and around me would deepen in congruence with this point of focus. I do not need to maintain a ‘cat like state of readiness’ regarding what might happen in the future if I can let go and just feel and experience what is happening Now. I can see the clouds moving across the sky, and quite literally smell the roses Now. Similarly, life is for the living Now. The more we meditate. The more rejuvenating and healing our sense of awareness and observation.” Ben concludes, “So, if you find yourself lost in time at some point in your life, pay attention to what your mind is doing and re-orient your awareness to all the subtle things happening Now. Pick something, anything, and deepen into the experience of that (preferably something beautiful and inspiring or at least neutral). You may be surprised at how good it feels and how much easier things naturally become for you in your experience of your life over time.” A few minutes of intentional meditation may help one live in the now for the rest of the day. The first psalm puts it this way. **Psalm 1: Select Phrases NLT “Oh, the joys of those who delight in the law of the Lord, meditating on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season.”**

During loss, suffering, and grief, avoid getting stuck in the why, ask for help, do something different for a few minutes each day and once a week enjoy God. As a friend to someone who is suffering strive to actively listen, offer specific things you can provide and enable them to enjoy a day a week that is different. Amen