

# *Suffering and the God of the Old Testament*

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

4<sup>th</sup> in a five-part series

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*Psalm 22:1-2, 6-8, 14-15 (NRSV)*

- <sup>1</sup> My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
- <sup>2</sup> O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;  
and by night, but find no rest.
- <sup>6</sup> But I am a worm, and not human;  
scorned by others, and despised by the people.
- <sup>7</sup> All who see me mock at me;  
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
- <sup>8</sup> “Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—  
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!”
- <sup>14</sup> I am poured out like water,  
and all my bones are out of joint;  
my heart is like wax;  
it is melted within my breast;
- <sup>15</sup> my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,  
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;  
you lay me in the dust of death.

*Jeremiah 3:19–20 (NIV)*

- <sup>19</sup>“I myself said,  
“How gladly would I treat you like my children  
and give you a pleasant land,  
the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.’  
I thought you would call me ‘Father’  
and not turn away from following me.  
<sup>20</sup>But like a woman unfaithful to her husband,  
so you, Israel, have been unfaithful to me,”  
declares the LORD.

*Why do we suffer? This is the inescapable question for those of us who believe in a good and loving Creator. The question cannot be ignored; so it must be faced.*

In the past three weeks, we’ve taken a look at three important biblical stories that shed light on our understanding of God and natural disasters:

- The story of creation. We learned that God created a good but not perfect world. Instead, God’s good creation seems to be a bit wild and untamed, even hostile. Right at the beginning (Gen. 1:28), the humans are told that this world will have to be subdued, in the full meaning of that word.
- The story of Noah and Flood. Here we focused on God, seeing that when God saw the wickedness that the humans fell into, he didn’t respond with anger and wrath, but with regret. God was sorry that he had made them in the first place! And this grieved God to his heart. Further, though God proceeded to “uncreate” in a way, God promised never to do so again. We worship a God who grieves and who freely chooses to place limits on his freedom of action.

- The story of Job, whose world fell in on him for no reason that he could discern. Here, we learned that the “why?” questions we ask of God are good to ask. We may not get the full explanation we seek, but we don’t have to settle for silence either. Additionally, we learned the lesson that too many Christians never seem to learn – just because someone suffers, it doesn’t mean that they brought it on themselves. Sin was not the cause of Joplin’s destruction. It was a tornado spawned by extreme atmospheric conditions. Sadly, the residents of Joplin and Tuscaloosa were in the way of an untamed creation.

### Hebrew Poetry

Most of us don’t read much poetry and most of us don’t know how to read it. Knowing how poetry is put together can help us surmount some of the barriers to understanding and appreciation. This is no less true for Hebrew poetry than it is for contemporary poetry. However, Hebrew poetry is not put together the way English poetry is put together. For example, I like poems that rhyme – but that is not how Hebrew poetry was written.

In their survey of the Old Testament, Hill and Walton, note that there are two principal characteristics of Hebrew poetry: rhythm of thought and rhythm of sound.

*Rhythm of thought* is the balancing of ideas in some structured form. It includes using synonyms, metaphors, word order, and parallel parts of speech. There are many more examples of techniques that the Hebrew poets used to create a rhythm in the expression of their thoughts. We need to keep this in mind when we are reading the poems. Look for the big point; listen for what it says to your heart. The psalms resist a detailed analysis of each word and phrase.

The poets also used a variety of techniques to create a *rhythm of sound* in the poem. Some of the psalms are acrostics, in which the first letters of succeeding lines or stanzas spell out the alphabet, a word, or a phrase. Sometimes the poets used alliteration, in which each word begins with the same consonant. The poets also used a lot of word plays. Unfortunately, nearly all of this is lost when the Hebrew is translated into another language. Many commentaries on the Psalms can help you see the poet’s art.

Now, we turn to the broad expanse of the Old Testament seeking a deeper understanding of suffering and God. Why the Old Testament? Because it is hard for many Christians to find in the Old Testament any God other than a wrathful one who waits to smite wrong-doers at every turn. The truth, though, is that the Old Testament is chock-full of reflections and imagery centered not only on our suffering, but on God’s suffering.<sup>1</sup>

*Why?*

Why do we suffer? That is the question we always come back to. We are like Gideon. When angel of the LORD shows up and tells Gideon to stay strong because “The LORD is with you,” Gideon replies, “But sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us.” We would ask the same question of that angel.

Too often, we are so desperate for answers that we concoct all sorts of reasons, many of which can be found in the explanations offered by Job’s friends. Fretheim lists a few of these<sup>2</sup>:

- Suffering is the will of God
- Suffering has been sent by God for a purpose
- God could have prevented the suffering but chose not to
- Suffering is specifically allowed by God, at least for a time.
- Suffering is God’s judgment because of sins committed
- Suffering is bad and to be avoided at all costs
- To suffer is to bear the cross

The problem isn’t that these explanations are *all* wrong, but neither are they *all* right. As Fretheim puts it, when we come to the Bible we have to be prepared for nuance. We might

<sup>1</sup>Terence Fretheim, whose book, *Creation Untamed*, inspired and undergirds this series, wrote a whole book on this topic: *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, Fortress Press, 1984.

<sup>2</sup>From Fretheim’s book, *Creation Untamed*, Baker Academic, 2010.

like the Bible to set things out in black and white, but the Bible simply doesn't when it comes to many of the questions we have. The bumper sticker reading "The Bible says it; I believe it" does an injustice to the full glories of the God-breathed Scriptures we have been given. Fretheim again:<sup>3</sup>

Faced with the realities of suffering and evil, Christians can say something, but they cannot say everything or even as much as they might like to say. They cannot "explain" suffering or "resolve" the problem of evil or provide "answers" to these issues or develop an airtight "theodicy." . . . [However,] the Bible does give its readers some room to speak between silence and "explanation."

Here's a few thoughts that might be helpful.

Suffering is a function of human limitations. We break easily. We get lonely and fearful. We are tempted into bad choices. These limitations are not the result of sin but are simply part of how God made us. Jesus was anxious and fearful in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. Jesus grieved over Lazarus. And Jesus was without sin. Could Jesus have cut himself using his carpenter tools? Of course. In the Garden of Eden, could Adam have climbed a tree, fallen out, and broken his leg. Sure. The laws of physics operated in the Garden. Indeed, we can bet that "subduing" creation wasn't any easier back then than it is now. Does our sin increase the suffering? Sure. Adam might have been pushed out of the tree. (I won't say by whom, but the candidates were limited).

Suffering results from the freedom we are given. As we've seen, from the beginning, God pulled humanity into the work of creation. We are to multiply; there is no magic God-wand for making babies; a man and woman must become one flesh. We are to subdue an untamed and often dangerous planet. It is human gardeners who help beautiful flowers to flourish in ways they never could in the wild. How many varieties of roses have human created? In this wild world, we have been given remarkable freedom to grow and to be challenged. The challenges of this world are often the means of our growth. How many parents believe that the best way to raise loving, responsible, well-adjusted adults is to give them everything they want and remove every obstacle and source of potential pain?

The writer of Ecclesiastes wisely observed, "Again I saw under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all" (9:11). God created a universe into which randomness is woven at every turn. Indeed, at the deepest structures of reality exists a strange, counterintuitive world that seems to be governed by dice as much as by anything. And yet we manage. We still land men on the moon. We still eliminate smallpox. And God is with us in all this.

Finally, suffering also stems from the fact that the LORD God Almighty has chosen to accomplish his purposes through us weak, finite humans. This is the cosmos that God, in his infinite wisdom, *chose* to create. I suppose that God could wave a magic wand and fix all our problems, take away everything that might harm us, but then we would no longer be thinking, loving, free creatures. What is love without the possibility of not loving? Consider those who have suffered the pain of unrequited love . . . for example, God.

Yes, there is mystery in suffering but it isn't all mystery. And always, we have to bear in mind and heart that God enters into our suffering with us. Far from any sort of remote absentee deity, the *God-Who-Is* has created a cosmos that is ever-changing and ever-challenging. The passage from Jeremiah that opened this study is one of many in which God is portrayed as suffering (for example, Exodus 2:23-25, 3:7-8; Amos 5:1-2; Jeremiah 9:17-18; Hosea 2:14-25 in which God is the unrequited lover). We proclaim a God who not only suffered and died on the cross, but has always been deeply involved with us and with suffering. It is this God with whom we live in relationship and, thus, we turn to the topic of faith and our practice of prayer in the midst of suffering. But that is for next week.

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<sup>3</sup> *Creation Untamed*, p. 100

## Memorizing Scripture Verses – a review (the final set)

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

James 2:15-17 (NRSV)

This verse has gotten lots of attention over the years. It drove Martin Luther crazy! Here, James isn't claiming that we are made right with God by what we do (our works). But he is saying that what we do to live out our new life in Christ really does matter. Directly to the point, our professed faith in Jesus Christ and the new life that we are given must affect what we do and how we live – mustn't it? How could new life not be seen by others?

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Matthew 28:19-20 (NRSV)

This is known as Jesus' Great Commission to his disciples, given to them as Jesus returned to the Father following his resurrection. This was their commission and it is ours too.

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. . . . If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

1 Corinthians 15:17, 19 (NRSV)

It's simple. If Jesus was not resurrected, for real and in the flesh, then Christianity is built on a lie. Paul, for one, has no interest in believing a lie and knows that he would deserve only pity if he did. He knows that if Jesus was not raised we are still estranged from God and, thus, dead in our sins. But . . . Christ is risen! Alleluia.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by looking at the bulleted list of “explanations” of suffering on page two. How many have you heard used? What were the circumstances? How did the explanation strike you at the time? How many have you used yourself? What do you think of the idea that nuance is demanded? Does that seem like a cop-out?
2. The idea that suffering or at least the potential for it, existed in the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve rebelled will challenge many (most!) Christians. What was your first reaction to it? How does the illustration of Adam falling out of a tree help? Does this notion really help us to understand that creation, though good, is also a bit dangerous? Does this reflection help you to avoid the conclusion that all suffering is directly or indirectly derived from sin?
3. As Christians, we typically find it pretty easy to embrace the notion of a God who suffers on the cross. But I've included some Old Testament passages that speak to a God who suffers because of his love for and rejection by his people. What might this say about the nature of God's cosmos? What might have led God to create a world with so much freedom, growth, and disorder?

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Jeremiah 9:17-19</b> God mourns and even cries over his people's faithlessness.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Isaiah 43:23-25</b> God is burdened with the sins of his people.</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Exodus 2:23-25; 3:7-8</b> God suffers with his people. (This is what implied by the Hebrew verbs applied to God).</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Hosea 4:1-3</b> The moral order affects the cosmic order.</p>
<p><b>Friday, Ecclesiastes 9:11</b> There is randomness in God's created order.</p>	<p><b>Weekly Joys and Concerns</b></p>

