

Text: Job 2:9-10

Title: “Suffering and a Powerless, Uncaring God”

INTRODUCTION

ILLUSTRATION - If you picked up your newspaper this morning, or took a look at your favorite news site on the internet you probably saw some stories that broke your heart ... the story of a little teenage girl in Greenville who was abducted not far from her home. Later they found her body left by the side of the road. Senseless! Or you read about the lingering effects of Hurricane Sandy up in the northeast ... all the devastation and suffering. Senseless! Or maybe your own devastating struggles are so overwhelming to you today that you can't worry much about what is going in other places. And in the face of these things we may, in the deepest recesses of our souls, we may ask, “Why doesn't God do something to stop this?”

During these weeks I've been trying to help us know how to answer some of the most lethal, toxic ideas that are floating around out there in the atmosphere of our culture ... hazardous material. And today I want to talk to you about the hazardous material, the lethal idea, that the presence of evil and suffering in this world must be mean that if God exists at all, He is powerless and uncaring.

ILLUSTRATION – Lee Strobel has written a book entitled *The Case for Faith*. The subtitle says, “A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Objections of Christianity.” The very first objection Lee Strobel addresses is this: Since evil and suffering exist, a loving God cannot.”

In fact Strobel did a nationwide survey that asked American adults, “If you could ask God only one question and you knew He would give you the answer, what would you ask?” The number one response was “Why is there pain and suffering in the world?”

ILLUSTRATION – Recently I read an article in Leadership Journal about the faith struggles of Steve Jobs, the cofounder of Apple who died about a year ago at the age of 56. Jobs was a student of Eastern philosophy, but earlier in his life he actually attended church with his adoptive parents. One day as a teenager he purchased a magazine the cover of which showed a pair of starving children in Africa. Steve Jobs went to the pastor of the church he attended with his parents and asked him some questions. He asked, “If I raise my finger, will God know which one I'm going to raise even before I do it?” The pastor answered, “Yes, God knows everything.” Jobs continued to press, “Well, does God know about this and what's going to happen to those children?” The pastor replied, “Steve, I know you don't understand, but yes, God knows about that.” That explanation did not satisfy Steve Jobs. I'm sure he was thinking, “If God knows about this, why did He let it happen, or what doesn't He stop it?” Steve Jobs walked out of church that day and never attended again.

Let's rewind about 4000 years to the life of man whose name is also spelled “JOB,” without the “s.” Not Jobs, but Job. His story is told in what many consider to be the oldest book in the Bible. Turn to Job 2:9-10. As you're turning I'll give you Job's backstory. Job was a righteous and prosperous man. One day Satan approached God with the proposal that Job would not be nearly as righteous if we were to be suddenly stripped of all he has. God permits Satan to bring suffering into Jobs life. In rapid succession Jobs herds and flocks were all destroyed, then all his children were killed in a tragic accident. But in all of this Job did not lose his faith in God. So Satan comes again to God and asked for permission to turn up the heat on Job, thinking that his faith will surely collapse. God agrees, and

Satan strikes Job with a disease that leaves him with sores from the bottom of his feet to the top of his head. Having lost everything, how would Job respond? Read Job 2:9-10.

What I have to say this morning will probably not answer all your questions about this hazardous idea that the presence of evil and suffering in the world must mean that God is powerless and uncaring. But I pray that you will find the answers in God's Word that will help you hold on to God in the midst of a world of evil and suffering.

Many people today believe that the existence of evil and suffering must mean that God, if He exists at all, must be powerless or uncaring. How do we refute this hazardous material? We need to understand...

1. TWO INESCAPABLE CERTAINTIES OF LIFE

- The experience of evil and suffering

From the beginning of human history and right up to today, we all know the certainty of suffering and evil. We live in a fallen world due to our sin; the results are incredible. Job's experience reveals evil (Satan) and suffering (loss, death, illness). And Jesus taught his disciples that in this world we will have trouble.

So one inescapable certainty of life is the experience of evil and suffering. But there's another certainty:

- The existence of a good God

Many people cannot reconcile these two inescapable realities. We wonder, "If He is a good God, why doesn't He just make everything better?"

ILLUSTRATION - The famous philosopher David Hume back in the 1700s asked: "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?" And this leads him to reject the existence of God.

Job's wife was thinking along the same lines:

Job 2:9 - His wife said to him, "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!"

Stop to think about this. How are human beings able to know that something is "evil" or "bad"? Nothing can be called "evil" without also acknowledging that if there is evil, then there must be the opposite of evil ... good. And if there is "good," who determines what "good" is? If there is a line that is called "crooked" then there must be an objective standard that is "straight" to compare it to.

That goodness and straightness comes from God. If you accept the existence of goodness, you must affirm that there is a moral law that shows us the difference between good and evil. And if there is a moral law, then there must be a moral Lawgiver. Who is that? It is the One True God. The only explanation for the reality that human beings innately know when something is

evil points to the fact that there is a God in whose image we are made who is the epitome of goodness.

So the very awareness of evil is evidence of the existence of God. The only worldview that makes any sense of the reality of evil and suffering is the biblical worldview that starts with the truth that the One True God exists.

So there are two inescapable realities. But we must also understand...

2. THREE ETERNAL QUALITIES OF GOD

Certainly Job struggled with the loss of his possessions, his children, and then his health. Certainly he struggled with reconciling the experience of suffering and the existence of a good God. But when Job's wife counseled him to curse God and die ...

Job 2:10 - He replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.

Now let's go back to the image I've been using in this series ... the Chain of Truth. It starts with the truth that the One True God exists. Who He is and what He thinks about all matters is accurately recorded for us in the Bible. So what does the Bible tell us about God, in this regard?

KEY: The answer to this dilemma is not to lower your view of God, but to raise your faith in God.

So what does the Bible tell us about God?

- **God knows all things.**

There are those who hold to something called "open theism" which says that God doesn't stop these bad things from happening because He doesn't *know* they are going to happen. They are based on choices made by others, and so God's knowledge of the future is limited to only what He will do, and not what humans will do. But that's not what the Bible teaches.

Psalm 139:1 - O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.

Psalm 139:2 - You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.

Psalm 139:3 - You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.

Psalm 139:4 - Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.

Psalm 139:5 - You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me.

Psalm 139:6 - Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

So the Bible teaches us that God knows all things.

- **The Bible also teaches us that God is good in all His ways.**

Psalm 103:8 - The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.

Psalm 107:1 - Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.

Now most people want to believe that God is good and loving. But how can they reconcile that belief with the fact of human suffering without concluding that God is limited in His ability to stop suffering and evil. But the Bible teaches us that ...

- **God can do all things.**

Job 42:2 - "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.

Psalm 115:3 - Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.

We see many places in the Bible where God broke all sorts of laws of physics and nature to perform some of the great miracles He performed ... the parting of the Red Sea, the feeding of the 5000, and many more miracles recorded in the Bible.

So the Bible gives us the knowledge that God is all-knowing, all-good and all-powerful. But if we are to be able to handle this hazardous material we need to also understand...

3. FOUR PERSONAL SECURITIES FOR LIFE

You know, there are people who question the existence of an all-knowing, all-good, all-powerful God because of suffering they see in the world. But most people who struggle with that dilemma do so because of suffering they're experiencing in their own lives ... the death of a spouse, the handicap of a child, a sexual assault or the unfaithfulness of a spouse. "Why did God let this happen to me?"

There's one event in human history that explains and reconciles the experience of suffering and evil and the existence of a good, loving God ... the Cross of Jesus Christ. And as we look at the Cross of Christ where Jesus died for our sins we see these four personal securities. These four securities sustained our Lord as He endured the suffering of the Cross for our sin.

- **God has a good purpose for our lives.**

Before Jesus was crucified He went to a garden to pray. And there He asked the Father to remove this terrible suffering from Him. But then He concluded by saying, "Father, not My will, but Your will be done." How could Jesus say that? It is because He understood that His heavenly Father had a good purpose that He was working out through the sufferings of the Cross. The Bible says...

Romans 8:28 - And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:29 - For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

But there's another personal security that sustained our Lord. It was the knowledge that...

- **God is in control of every circumstance in our lives.**

Do you realize that God knew and planned everything about the crucifixion of His Son? When Jesus was arrested He said...

John 19:11 - "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above..."

In Peter's sermon at Pentecost he proclaimed to the religious leaders who persecuted Jesus:

Acts 2:23 - This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

What a mystery! You see godless men with nothing but evil designs were directly responsible for the death of Jesus. Yet God not only knew would happen; He actually planned it. I don't understand how a holy, righteous God could use such terrible evil to accomplish His purpose and plans. But there is this truth: God is in control of every circumstance to accomplish His good purposes for us.

And there's another personal security:

- **God will take us through difficulties to accomplish that purpose.**

ILLUSTRATION – Suppose you happened to walk into a surgical suite at a hospital in the middle of a doctor performing open heart surgery. You would see a person lying helplessly on table, medicated to where they do not know what's going on. You see a masked man with a sharp knife about to cut into the chest of this innocent person. Without any more information that just what you see you would probably conclude this masked man is about to torture this innocent, helpless victim. But if you stayed around long enough you would soon come to see that the inflicting of this pain and suffering is for a purpose. And if you could talk to that person a few weeks later you would learn that they are alive and healthy because of the pain inflicted in the surgery.

And the prime example of God's ability to use pain, suffering and even outright evil to accomplish good is the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus was innocent and perfect in every way, but He endured the most horrific torture ever invented by human beings ... crucifixion. The suffering Jesus endured at His crucifixion was not just physical, because the Bible tells us that in that moment God heaped on Jesus the sins of all humanity. So the suffering was beyond description ... so much so that...

Matthew 27:46 - About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice ... “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

And when Jesus died it appeared that evil had triumphed. But the events of three days later give us a different perspective. God raised Jesus from the dead. God will use difficulties and suffering to bring about His purposes in our lives.

And there is another personal security we have:

- **God’s purpose for us will be accomplished.**

It was true for Jesus.

Acts 2:24 - But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

It will be true for us.

1 Peter 4:12 - Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.

1 Peter 4:13 - But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

We ask, “Why doesn’t God stop the evil and suffering?” Well, one day He will. One day His glory will be revealed, and we will see how all our sufferings and trials have been used by God for our good and not for our harm.

CONCLUSION

ILLUSTRATION – John Ortberg, in his book *Faith and Doubt*, tells the story about a woman named Sheryl who went to a nail salon. In the course of getting her nails done the manicurist said, “I don’t believe God exists.” Sheryl asked why, and the girl responded, “Well, you just have to go out on the street to realize God doesn’t exist. Tell me, if God exists would there be so many sick people? Would there be abandoned children? If God existed, there would be neither suffering nor pain. I can’t imagine a loving god who could allow these things.” Sheryl didn’t try to answer the girl’s objections. She simply left when the manicure was complete. As Sheryl walked out of the shop and immediately noticed a woman with long, stringy, filthy hair. Sheryl had an idea of how to answer the manicurist. She whirled around, walked back into the salon and announced to the manicurist, “You know what? Beauticians do not exist.” The girl said, “How can you say that? I just did your nails.” Sheryl said, “No. Beauticians don’t exist, because if they did there would be no people with dirty, nasty, messed up hair like that woman outside.” The girl replied, “Beauticians do exist. The problem is, people don’t come to me.”

That’s the answer. Turn to God with your questions, your doubts and fears. He will give His light through life’s troubles.