

God Feels

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[0 : 0 0] Does anybody else feel tired? I feel like, at least for me, at least today, that everything is just, yeah, it's just kind of closing in around us, and I feel like time has simultaneously gone to a standstill, and it's also all compressed, and everything's happening fast and at once.

I feel like time has no meaning, and that all just turns into a sense of weariness. I know that if you're part of the black community or a person of color, there's a sense of weariness that settles in with injustice and what happened to Ahmad, and we'll talk about that today.

I know that for if you're a parent, there's a sense of weariness of that, the fact that your kids are still in your house. I know that if you're alone, there's a sense of weariness of, do I get to not be alone ever again?

I know if you're struggling with your beliefs about God, and if he's good, and if he's there, there's a sense of weariness of, will God ever reveal himself to me? Will God ever make this all make sense?

And that's why we're in this series called Out of Control, like terrible things happen in a study on the book of Job, and today's going to be a little bit different than some of our other Sundays.

[1 : 1 9] Anyways, I'm pre-recording this, and we're going to have some opportunities for conversation and talk, and so I'm going to talk for a little bit. There's going to be a question that shows up on the screen, and then there'll be some time where we can go to the chat and talk for a little bit, just for a minute, minute and a half, and then we'll go back to some teaching, and we'll do that a couple times.

So I want this to be an opportunity for interaction and engagement, and if you're not into that, then you can just watch the counter on the countdown clock during the conversation time, and that's okay too. Because, like I said, we're all weary, and maybe the last thing you want to do is type in a text box.

Anyway, anyway, so we're in the middle of a series on the book of Job, and last week we talked about five bad solutions for the problem of evil, the problem of pain and suffering, and how we find those bad solutions within the book of Job itself.

So, first of all, bad solution number one, God allows. Any sort of logic, reasoning, idea that God could have stopped this pain, suffering, problems in the world, but for some unknown and serious reason decided not to.

God could have stopped it, but decided not to. God allows. And we see this logic played out in Job 1 and 2, the logic of the courtroom, the divine courtroom. God and the Satan, and God saying, go get Job, Satan, that's fine, I'm going to allow this to happen.

[2 : 4 3] That's bad solution number one. Bad solution number two. At least heaven. And honestly, any sort of at least statement at all, which we're going to focus on today, this number two at least statement.

But particularly at least heaven. Hey, I know this really terrible bad thing is happening, but at least heaven's going to be great, right? And we see that at the end of the book of Job, the last chapter where Job gets new children and all of his flocks are doubled, and it's a happy, happy ending.

That's a bad solution to the problem of pain and suffering because it doesn't actually answer anything. Number three, God punishes. This is the perspective of Job's friends throughout the entire book.

The idea that, look, if you do bad things, bad things will happen to you. If you do good things, good things will happen to you. And the reverse, that if there is good things happening in your life, it's because you deserve it and God's blessing you.

And if there are bad things happening in your life, it's because you deserve it and God is punishing you. You can read it either way. That's what Job's friends say. There's also the God's ways are not our ways logic.

[3 : 49] That's the bad solution number four. And this is what Job himself believes. He basically believes that God has given up any sense of justice, that God is unpredictable, unknowable, that God smiles at the wicked flourishing.

God laughs at the innocent suffering. God is just, you know, can do whatever he wants, and that's absolutely fine. And bad solution number five is that God doesn't need us.

He doesn't need to answer us. He doesn't need us to question him. And this is the answer of the God in the whirlwind in the last few chapters of the book of Job.

The God who shows up there doesn't need to give us any answers, doesn't need to explain himself. So please just be quiet. And what I argued for last week is that Job is intentionally unsatisfying.

It's unsatisfying that whoever wrote the book of Job, they wrote it as this play, this drama that would be performed as a way to show the audience all of the really unsatisfying ways to answer the question of evil and pain and suffering in the world.

[4 : 57] It is meant to confuse us. It is meant for us to read the book of Job and say, that's not helpful. Okay? Now, we also talked about the things that we do know, that we do know about God.

Number one, that God is love. That love means something. It has definition and character. We can say definitive things about what love is like. We talked about how God can't do certain things.

God can't lie. God can't get tired. God can't sin. God can't deny his own character. God can't not be loving because God is love. And so God must always be loving.

And we talked about the fact that God is knowable through Jesus. We can know what God is like because we know what Jesus is like. Thanks to the gift of scripture, we can know that Jesus lived out the love of God.

According to the book of Acts, Jesus went around empowered by the spirit of God, doing good. When he came across sickness, he healed it. When he came across hungry people, he fed them. There was never a time in Jesus's life where he inflicted pain onto someone or he saw someone in pain and didn't try to help.

[6 : 06] Which leads to this big, big, big, big question. Then why is there still pain and suffering and genuine, irredeemable evil in the world? And solution number one is that God can't prevent evil and suffering single-handedly.

That's not that God could do it. And just chooses not to for some reason that we can't figure out. It's that God, because he is a God of love, and because love is not coercive, love does not insist on its own way, love can lose.

God cannot prevent evil and suffering single-handedly. God doesn't want there to be evil and suffering, but God doesn't always get what God wants. Now, that doesn't mean, and we're going to talk more about this throughout the month of May, that doesn't mean that God isn't working to prevent evil and suffering.

He is, he is, he is, he is always only working to prevent evil and suffering. But God can't do it single-handedly, because that would make him unloving and unkind, because that would make him coercive if he were just to take control of somebody or something and coerce it into doing his will.

It would be an unloving action. So, let's have some question time. If you have a phone, tablet, laptop in front of you, jump into the chat, and we'll have about 90 seconds to talk about this.

[7 : 30] It's going to be quick. But here's the question. What are some of the stupid, unhelpful, or unkind things that have been said to you when you've been in pain, when you've been hurt, when something bad has happened in your life?

So, jump into the comments. I will be there, too, and we can talk about this together. Okay, so the, you know, not great thing about this format is that there is a version of me in the future that just had a conversation with you, but me in the past doesn't know what me in the future is going to talk about.

Sorry. So, I can make some guesses about what that conversation is going to be like, though. And I'm going to guess that there were a lot of unhelpful statements that start with at least.

A lot of unhelpful statements that start with at least. When my brother died in a car accident, you know, you'd hear things like, well, at least you'll get to see your brother in heaven.

Maybe you have lost a loved one. Maybe a child, a parent, a grandparent, a friend. And you know, things like, well, at least you still have your family. Hey, you went through a miscarriage.

[8 : 47] Well, at least you can still have another kid. Hey, you've got cancer, but at least it hasn't killed you yet. Just lots of unhelpful statements that start with at least, which is basically this way of like, I don't want to encounter or deal with the pain that you're feeling right now.

I'm going to change the topic to something happier. That's problem number two and problematic solution number two in the book of Job. If we go to Job chapter 42, you see this explanation of the end of Job's life or the last, you know, half of Job's life where, yes, Job went through this terrible, terrible thing.

His kids all died. He lost all of his wealth. He lost all of his health. He was sick and in pain. And Job 42 says, but God gave him back double everything that Job had lost, except for his kids.

He doesn't get double the amount of kids, which I don't know what your perspective on that is on that. But he got double the amount of sheep and double the amount of camels and double the amount of his wealth. And he got the same amount of kids as he had before.

He got back, which is good news, I guess. But this doesn't actually help with grief. If you are a grieving person and someone says like, well, at least you can get it back.

[10 : 05] That doesn't actually help with your grief. It doesn't help with the loss that you have encountered. Grief is about loss and grief is about the things and the people and the life that we had that is now gone.

And there is no amount of replacement or like getting new things that makes what we lost come back. It just doesn't work like that. And, and, and, and, this is also rarely how life works.

You don't get two grandparents for every one that dies. You don't get two kids for every miscarriage that you go through. Two gay people aren't born for every time there's a discriminatory action against them.

We don't get two new black people for every black person murdered on the streets. Yeah, yeah. Let's talk about that. Let's talk about Ahmaud Arbery. And he was 25 years old.

He was shot and killed while going for a jog, going for a run. And he was killed for the crime of being, of running while black. Now listen to the possible responses that we could have to this.

[11 : 13] Well, God allows, how are you going to end that sentence? God allows people of color to be murdered for some greater cause, for some divine plan. Can we believe that that kind of God is actually good?

God allowed this for some greater purpose. That does not reflect well on the character of God. We could say, well, at least, and again, how are you going to finish that sentence? At least what?

At least he had 25 years. Well, some black people aren't that lucky to escape the murderous intent of racism and white supremacy. At least what? We could say God punishes.

And I say, now hold on there. God punishes Ahmaud for some unknown crime or sin. But that means that God doesn't punish those who got wealthy off the backs of black labor.

God doesn't punish those who have a shotgun available to them to shoot people and then go home. How are you going to finish the sentence God punishes? How about God's ways?

[12 : 10] God's ways are somehow more just and loving and kind than just a simple, basic, human, decent desire to not see innocent people die. So God's ways are better than that?

More loving than that? Or God doesn't need? Well, God doesn't need Ahmaud Arbery for him to be a glorious God. God doesn't need to explain himself.

God doesn't need to explain why systems of racism and white supremacy allow innocent black people to be killed on the streets. God doesn't need us to do something about it because God will take care of it in the end when we're all raptured to heaven and it'll be fine.

God just sits on high and detached and hopes for the best. You see, these are five very big problematic ways that we can respond to genuine evil in the world.

And this is how we've been trained to respond to genuine evil in the world. When something absolutely awful and just bad and unforgivable happens, if we've been trained to respond in this way, well, God allows at least, you know, God is punishing.

[13 : 17] God's ways aren't our ways. God doesn't need to explain himself. God doesn't need to explain to us. God's ways that we can make us kind of jerks, honestly. I mean, our theology shapes the way that we respond to life.

What we believe about God, what we believe about how the world works, shapes how we work in the world. And bad theology just leads to bad living. Bad theology can make us either say things about God that are blasphemous and untrue.

It can also make us move in the world in ways that are harmful and wrong, or it can move us into passivity. Because we feel like if God isn't going to do anything about it, then I'm not going to do anything about it either.

If God just sits back and allows terrible things to happen, then maybe we should too. If we think that God has no feelings or emotion, if God is unmoving, then maybe we should just kind of shut down our emotions as well.

If we think that God is a murderous, punishing God that has no problem slaying entire races of people, making sure that women and children die for the sins of God knows what, then maybe we think that we should respond in the same way.

[14 : 30] And if there's some collateral damage along the way, well, God seems to be fine with that. If we think that God's ways are above our ways, then we might just believe in a God not worth believing in.

If we think that God doesn't need to explain himself and doesn't need people, then we might just reject everyone and everything as well. Bad theology leads to bad living.

So, if we believe in an unfeeling, uncaring, unmovable God, this is a question for discussion now. How might that negatively shape our actions in the world?

If we believe in an unfeeling, uncaring, unmovable God, how might that negatively shape our actions in the world? Let's jump back to the chat. I'll be there as well. We'll talk about this for a couple of minutes and then come back.

Bad theology leads to bad living, which is why we need to talk about these hard questions so we get our heads on straight about what is really true about God.

[15 : 41] And what we want to affirm this week is that God feels. Last week, we talked about how God can't single-handedly prevent evil and suffering.

And so, when we believe that about God, we don't have to say things like, well, God allows, because that makes it seem like God has some higher purpose, higher plan than just preventing evil and suffering and death and stopping bad things from happening.

Rather, we affirm a God who loves, who is always loving. We affirm a kind of love that is non-coercive. It is not controlling, but it's rather a persuasive love, a love that is about convincing and moving and changing people, not coercing, single-handedly controlling people.

So we can't make God culpable. We can't blame God for the bad things that happen in the world, because God is a God who gives genuine freedom to people. And then when God gives genuine freedom, this is the New Testament, where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

The Spirit of the Lord is everywhere. There is genuine freedom for people to make their own choices. God can't arbitrarily reject his own loving nature and take that freedom away. We also affirm that God is a God that feels.

[16 : 57] Classical theology, in an effort to protect God from paganistic or kind of juvenile thoughts about God, what God is like, described God as the unmoved mover, that God was eternally timeless, unaffected by the world, incapable of emotion, feeling, or what we might describe as thoughts.

God wasn't personal in classical theology, but super personal. He was above being personal, and we could not conceive of what that might be like. I, and lots of other theologians, say that this classical theology actually ignores how God reveals himself in Scripture, and particularly in the person of Jesus.

Let's talk about some of God's feelings here for a second. Isaiah 42 says this. This is God talking. God says, Like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp, and I pant.

And this is talking about God's efforts to bring all things in the world to renewal. Isaiah 63 says this, And when they suffered, God suffered too, and the messenger of his presence acted to save them.

This is not the God that's the unmoved mover. This is not the God who is so far above and beyond that he cannot comprehend what it's like to be human. This is the God who suffers alongside.

[18 : 21] God's feelings are described throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament, that God experiences joy and grief and laughter and compassion and empathy. And let's talk about empathy for a second, because empathy, I believe, is really, really opposed to those at least statements.

There's pity. And pity is something that's detached. It's judgmental. It's superior. It gives advice. Pity is what causes people to not get involved with other people's emotions.

It tries not to imagine what it's like. Pity is what looks upon someone else and is like, well, you know, it sucks to be them and hate to be in their shoes. What a pity. Pity tends to be judgmental.

Pity is like, oh man, they really got themselves into it this time. I wonder what they did to get themselves into such trouble or pain or heartache or suffering. Pity has a sense of superiority.

You are feeling those negative, bad feelings, and I am not, thank goodness. And pity is all about the advice giving. Let me tell you what I would do if I were in your shoes.

[19 : 25] As opposed to empathy, empathy is feeling with, feeling alongside, getting down in the pit with someone else. I'm like, yeah, I've been here before, and I know the way out.

Or, actually not even that, just, I'm here with you. I'm here with you. Pity isn't judgmental. Empathy, I'm sorry, empathy isn't judgmental. Empathy holds space for the other person.

It doesn't try to create a story or a narrative about why this person is feeling the way they are. It simply allows that person to feel without fear of judgment. Empathy is all about sharing a humanity with somebody.

It's not superiority of you're feeling that negative thing, and I just can't even imagine what it must be like to feel so bad. Empathy, it shares that human experience altogether of, yeah, I can think of a time where I've also felt that sad and angry and hurt.

I've been there too. Empathy isn't about advice giving. Let me tell you how to get out of this situation. Empathy is about companionship. It's about whatever it is you're facing, let's face it together.

[20 : 34] And fixing the problem, giving advice, that's not the point. Of course we want to find ways to move forward, but there's no good way to move forward if you're not doing it with someone.

And empathy is all about that feeling with, being with. And we see this shown most clearly in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the suffering God in the flesh.

Jesus is the God who weeps at the death of a friend. Jesus is the God who defends the vulnerable. He gets down in the muck and the mud with those who are experiencing colonialism and racism and prejudice.

And he gets down with them and defends them and experiences that pain with them. Jesus is the suffering God who puts himself in the place of those who suffer.

I think about the woman who was caught in the act of adultery and forgiven by Jesus. And this woman is thrown into the middle of a mob that's about to lynch her.

[21 : 45] And Jesus' response is to actually get into the middle with her. Jesus was ready to be lynched in her stead. And in fact, was.

Jesus is the suffering God who is like the Good Samaritan. The religious people walked by the man who was beaten up and thrown into a ditch.

And the Good Samaritan who represents Jesus is the one who gets close to this person who has been ostracized and hurt and wounded and gets down with him.

Jesus, of course, is the suffering God who suffers on the cross. And for reasons that take a long time to get into right now. But takes on the sin and the darkness of the entire world.

Takes on the forces of evil. And applies that to himself. And this is a God who suffers and suffers and suffers alongside us.

[22 : 53] He doesn't suffer so that we don't have to suffer. I think that's a kind of bad and cheap way of explaining what Jesus did on the cross. Jesus suffers just as we suffer too.

This is the kind of God that we worship. Not the unmoving, unfeeling God. But the God who feels and suffers alongside. There's a song that Christians have sung for a couple decades now, I feel.

It says, And what I love about the God that we worship is that God's heart breaks by what breaks us. God's heart breaks by what breaks us.

We believe in the God who feels. God feeling, just to be clear though, is not enough. If our only kind of logical response to pain and suffering in the world is God feels it too, then we still have a deficient God.

A God who is not all loving. If you came across a car accident, and you got out of the car, and you find the driver pinned and bleeding and crying for help, would you just go to that person and say like, Well, I could help you.

[24 : 04] I could kind of push open the car. But instead, I'll just stand by. Instead of rescuing you, I will empathize with your suffering. I'll just imagine what it's like to be in your place.

No! Failing to push the car, open the car up, is not what love requires. And God is not above that same requirement. God, if God came across somebody in a car, if Jesus came across somebody in a car and bleeding, crying for help, Jesus would do whatever he could to open up that car, get that person out.

God isn't just the God who empathizes with us. God gets involved. So, let's do a few takeaways for this week. Number one, remove the phrase, at least, from your vocabulary.

If somebody ever comes to you and they have a problem, they're hurting, they are encountering pain, sickness, death, loss, just don't use the words at least.

It's going to be pretty rare that that's ever going to be a helpful thing to say. Number two, if your theology, your beliefs about God, move you to inaction and unfeeling, check your theology up against an active and feeling God.

[25 : 23] And number three, when you pray, remember that God feels with you. God is not a brick wall. He is not the unmoving God.

He is not far off and distant, just watching down from some other place. God is moved by what moves you. And God is always working for your good.