

God Can't

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[0 : 00] Well, again, my name is Anthony Parrott. I'm one of the pastors on staff here, and we're going to get into the Word together. I want to thank and welcome everybody who's here, especially our visitors, our newcomers.

We do have an after party that was mentioned that we'll be doing after each service. And I know, like, it's digital church, it's virtual church, and it's kind of hard to feel like you can get connected and get involved.

So I thank you, first of all, for just, like, logging on, getting on to our live stream. I also want to encourage you to take that next step to meet some of us over Zoom, and I think you'll feel that sense of connection.

And it will help you feel like maybe you can be part of something, be part of a church. I'm going to check my notifications. It's a really rude thing to do. But just in case something's broken, I need to make sure. Okay, nothing's broken. Good.

So last week, I gave my testimony, my life story, and I want to thank everybody for the really kind words that you shared. I'm glad that you found my story and my testimony something encouraging and worthwhile.

[1 : 07] If you didn't get a chance to listen to it, we had some technical difficulties last week, I encourage you to go back to our YouTube page and check it out. It's called My Father Was a Wandering Aramean. And it's one of those stories that's about pain and it's about heartache and it's about the hard things that happen in my life and how God used that for my good.

And we have all had hard things happen in our lives. Maybe your mom didn't try to take, like, a road trip to Egypt, but we've all had difficulty in our lives in one way or another.

When you're little, you have the difficulty of learning how to walk and you fall and you scrape your knee and it hurts and you cry. When you get bigger, you suffer loss and pain and heartache.

Some of you have encountered true, absolute evil in your lives, evil that's been put upon you. And you have hurt in ways that I can't imagine, that is just hard to imagine, and it's your pain and yours alone.

And we're not unique. Each of our pain is unique, and yet our pain is also universal. All of us as human beings have suffered.

[2 : 23] All of us as human beings have experienced genuine evil happening to us. And so even though our pain is unique to us, our experience is unique to us, we're also united by all the pain and suffering and evil that we've experienced.

And we are united throughout history. So when we turn to a book like the Bible, what I love about the Bible is that the Bible is a very, we get the Bible with all of its warts.

And so we get the Bible with stories about people who mess up and screw up and fail, and people who have also experienced true, deep suffering and pain.

And we get to a book like Job, which we're going to be studying for the next five weeks. And we get to a book like Job in the Bible. And it's not just people, there's stories about how they've experienced pain.

It's also how people wrestle with the questions that come with pain. And I love that about the Bible, that we don't just get a book of answers. We get a book of wrestling.

[3 : 26] We don't get just a book of like easy A equals B and C equals D. We get a book of struggling and wrestling and asking questions and not knowing the answer.

And we can relate to this book. And I know oftentimes we wish that we could just like open up some book of the Bible, just have it all spelled out for us. But I also don't think that's how our brains work and how our lives work.

We're experiential people and we need to wrestle alongside with. And so we're opening up the book of Job this month of May to wrestle alongside with the characters in the book of Job.

So when something bad has happened in your life, you've probably had people come to you, come into your life, and try to explain why this bad thing is happening.

When you have experienced sickness or death or maybe some evil has been added into your life, you've been assaulted, you've been robbed, you've been hurt, you will have people who probably out of the best of intentions try to explain why this bad thing happened.

[4 : 38] And it gets harder to explain when you believe in a good God. If you call yourself a believer, a Christian, a Jesus follower, or just a theist, you just believe in some sort of divine power.

It gets harder and harder to explain why bad things happen if we believe in a good God who we believe is sovereign and in control. And so as Christians, we have to wrestle with these questions. We have to wrestle with these hard things because the book of 1 Peter tells us, always be prepared for an answer for those who ask you why you have this hope. And so if we have to be people who have to be prepared for an answer, we need to wrestle with these hard things.

And I think we've all noticed we're in one of the most unusual and difficult and strange and all those words that we're sick of in hard times in a long time.

And we, as Jesus followers, Christians, the church with a capital C, I think we have a responsibility to learn about how to answer these questions so that when we encounter those who don't yet know Jesus, who don't yet know God, then they ask us, how can you believe in a good God when this is happening?

[5 : 50] We can answer responsibly and reasonably. So that's why I wanted to study the book of Job over these next five weeks. So you're going to have to pardon me.

I've got a laptop here that controls the words that are in the corner. So I'm going to be doing some back and forth and the autofocus is going to get all wonky and stuff like that. But we'll deal. Let's talk about five things that people might say to you when you're experiencing pain and how that connects with the book of Job and why those five things are, we'll just say it, wrong.

Here we go. Number one, maybe you've heard a phrase like God allows. And it's not a typo that G is not capitalized.

We'll get to that. You'll hear something like God allows you to suffer. God could have prevented the evil in your life. God is all powerful and all sovereign. God could have prevented it, but for some reason we don't know, he chose not to.

Or another way to put it, and this is kind of technical, so bear with me, God can't maximize the amount of good in your life without there being pain and suffering.

[7 : 01] God is unable to increase the amount of good in your life without you suffering in some way. So what about genuine evils, though? Evils that seem to have absolutely no redemptive purpose.

Look, we've all experienced pain in the dentist's chair or maybe at a doctor's office or surgery, but that's pain that has a purpose. It hurts, but it's not harmful.

It's pain that brings healing. We've all experienced that. And maybe we've experienced things like scraping our knee when we've been learning to walk so we can, you know, as Alfred says in Batman Begins, why do we fall so we can learn to pick ourselves back up again?

Okay, there are those kinds of evils, but there are also the kinds of evils that don't seem to have any sort of redemptive purpose. So when we hear something like God allowed, God could have prevented this genuine evil, but for some unknown reason chose not to, we have to ask, does this meet the minimum requirement of a good, loving God?

Think about it from a parenting perspective. If I watched my child being tortured and abused, and I had the power to help, but instead just stood by and watched, would I be considered a good, loving parent?

[8 : 20] If I said something like, well, it'll build their character, nobody from an outside perspective would watch that style of parenting and think, yeah, they're good and loving. If I was watching somebody suffer, had the ability to intervene, but simply chose not to, could that be considered good and loving?

So, how does this intersect with the book of Job? This is how Job begins to explain pain and suffering. In Job chapters 1 and 2, you have this scene of God, the Satan, Hebrew word, ha-Satan, means the accuser, so God, the Satan, and this divine courtroom.

And in this divine courtroom, Satan goes to accuse Job in front of God about he wouldn't really be good if his life weren't so good. And so Job chapter 1 verse 12 says, The Lord said to the Satan, Very well then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger. Which, you know, maybe sounds okay, and so you realize that the Satan then orchestrates the death of all of Job's kids. So Job's life is spared, but his kids are not. Job chapter 2, verses 6 and 7, The Lord said to the Satan, Very well then, he, Job himself, is in your hands, but you may not spare his life.

So the Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and afflicted Job. This is the logic of God allows. This is one thing that we might hear when something bad happens to it.

[9 : 53] Well, God allowed it for something else to happen in your life. God allowed this evil for reasons we don't know. That's the first possible solution that the book of Job offers us.

Let's keep going. Number two, something you might hear is, but heaven. Hey, it doesn't matter what we suffer here on earth. It doesn't matter how bad your pain and your suffering is here, but heaven is so much better that you really, you can't even bring it up.

You can't even bring up your pain and suffering. Heaven is so much better. And, you know, I hope that's the case. I hope that heaven is so exceedingly far better than we can possibly imagine that all of our pain and suffering is just forgotten here on this side of death.

That's kind of the logic that Paul brings up. He says our current afflictions don't even compare to our future glory. And that's a very audacious statement. I really hope he's right.

But it's also not a particularly helpful thing to say. If you're in pain, turmoil, heartache, and someone's like, well, hey, at least you got heaven to look forward to, that doesn't really help. If I visit you in the hospital and you are sick, you are dying, and I say something like, hey, I know you're going to be abandoning your family and your parents and your kids and your friends, but hey, heaven, that's not helpful.

[11 : 13] It's not a pastorally good response. Even if it's true, it's not kind, it's not helpful. If I go and I go overseas and I come across some starving kids and they just are desperate for food and water and shelter and basic necessities, if I go and just declare, but heaven, that's not good work.

It's also not anything at all like what Jesus did, which we'll talk about Jesus too. This is the second way that the book of Job also tries to answer this question. If we skip to the end of the book, Job chapter 42, we get this fairy tale happy ending.

It says that the Lord restored Job's fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before. All his family and his friends comforted and consoled Job over all the trouble the Lord had brought on him. The Lord blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the former part. He had 14,000 sheep and as I say, 6,000 camels, 1,000 yoke of oxen, 1,000 donkeys, which is twice as the amount as before listed in Job chapter 1.

And he also had seven more sons and three more daughters. So in the first book, chapter of the book of Job, all of his kids die. And if you lost a child or a loved one, a parent, a sibling, a friend, and someone said like, well, at least you can have more, first of all, never start a sentence with the least, never helpful.

[12 : 34] And second of all, like it just, you want to slap them in the face. If you've lost a loved one and someone's like, well, at least you can have another one, like you just slap them in the face. It's also rarely how things happen and work in life.

In Job, you can't take Job 42 and apply it to someone else's situation. Hey, too bad you lost everything. God's going to now give you double. No, that's not true.

It's just not how the world works. So, you could hear God allows. You could hear but heaven. What else could you hear? God punishes.

God allows is the logic of God doesn't want to make bad things happen. He doesn't do it himself. He just stands back and lets bad things happen. God punishes is the logic of no, God actively, purposefully adds pain and trouble into the world to teach the world a lesson.

If anyone has ever told you that God is punishing you for your sin or that God hasn't healed you because you don't have enough faith, that God sends natural disasters and sicknesses and coronaviruses to teach people a lesson, this is the logic of God punishes.

[13 : 50] It's also interesting that most of the time God is usually not punishing you but he's punishing your enemies or those who disagree with you and rarely you. Pastor and theologian John Piper once claimed that God sent tornadoes to Minneapolis to punish a denomination for allowing LGBT folks to become ordained in the church.

And isn't it interesting that John Piper saw the tornado and assumed that it was punishing that denomination and didn't assume that God was sending the tornado to punish John Piper's church for not ordaining LGBT folks.

It's interesting how that works. This logic is in fact what gets the most airtime in the book of Job. This is what Job's friends are teaching.

Throughout the book of Job, Job's friends assume that God is directly, intentionally punishing Job. Job chapter 4, who, being innocent, has ever perished.

Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, this is one of Job's friends talking, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it. At the breath of God they perish, at the blast of his anger they are no more.

[15:06] So Job's friends logic is, hey, if someone dies, they deserved it. If someone is sick, they deserved it. There has never been a person, according to Job's friends, there has never been a person who has experienced trouble and didn't deserve it and God wasn't the one who sins it.

Job chapter 8, when your children sinned against God, Job's friends, going to Job and saying, hey, when your children sinned, God gave them over to the penalty of their sin and they died.

Job chapter 11, if God comes along and confines you in prison and, excuse me, convenes a court, who can oppose him? If you do bad, you're punished. If you do good, you're not.

Call it karma, call it you reap what you sow, call it divine retribution. It's an easy-peasy way of understanding the universe. Except wait. At the end of the book of Job, Yahweh himself, the God character in the book of Job, says, no, Job's friends have all spoken wrongly of me and unless Job intercedes for them, they're going to be punished, which has to be the most frustrating thing in the world for Job's friends to hear, hey, you said that if you do wrong, God punishes.

Well, that's wrong, so I'm going to punish you. If you're Job's friends, you're like, come on, this makes no sense. So, God allows, but heaven, God punishes.

[16:26] These are three things we might hear. What's number four? Let's keep going. God's ways. God's ways are not our ways. We can't understand how God works.

We don't have the eternal perspective that God has. If we were to turn the tapestry around, it would all make sense. We can't limit God to what we understand of what a good and loving God would do. God has an even better and higher concept of love and goodness than we do, so we can't trust our common sense. In other words, God's ways says that God is unknowable, unpredictable, and what we might call evil, God might call good, and vice versa.

Who can say for sure? This, by the way, is the official position of the book of Job. Let's keep going. Job's view says that God is unpredictable and untrustworthy. Job chapter 9 says, Innocent or wicked, it's all the same to God. That's why I say, this is Job talking, that's why I say he destroys both the blameless and the wicked.

[17:37] When a plague sweeps through, he laughs at the death of the innocent. The whole earth is in the hands of the wicked and God blinds the eyes of the judges. This is Job talking about God.

Job chapter 10, still Job, Why do you reject me to work of your own hands while smiling on the schemes of the wicked? God thinks that what the wicked do is worth smiling about.

Job chapter 24, From the city to dying groan in the throat of the wounded cries for help, yet God pays no attention to their prayer. God's, excuse me, Job's primary complaint is that he actually, in principle, God agrees with the God punishes the wicked idea.

But Job, believing and knowing his own innocence, sees God as turning against God's own justice and punishing and afflicting for no good reason. Job is making a common sense argument that since the world appears to be filled with chaos, the wicked prosper, and with the innocent suffering, God just must not care.

And unfortunately, for those who use Job to explain evil and suffering, God agrees with Job. At the end of the book of, the book of Job, the God character says, I'm angry with you, Job's friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me as my servant Job has.

[19:00] And the God character actually says this twice. Job's friends have spoken wrongly. Job has spoken correctly. Job was right. So, let's talk about the God character in the book of Job.

God doesn't need. The God character in the book of Job doesn't need to answer you. God doesn't need to defend God's self.

God doesn't need to explain God's self. The God character who shows up in chapter 38 and rants for three chapters is not interested in answering any questions about what's going on.

This God who shows up in the book of Job is aloof and proud and egotistical and unconcerned with Job's pain and offers not a single word of comfort.

So, there you have it. Job successfully presents five incredibly unsatisfying answers to the world's most difficult questions. Have a good week, everyone. No, I'm kidding. No, let's keep going.

[20 : 03] There's good news in here, okay? This is what I think the good news is. As I think Job was written to be intentionally unsatisfying. I think the book of Job was written on purpose for us to come to the end of the book and say, huh?

It's on purpose. We're not supposed to walk away from the book of Job and say, everything makes sense now. I believe the author of Job wants us to read their composition and think, this makes no sense.

That's the very point that the author is trying to make. Think about stories like Hunger Games, 1984, The Matrix, Maze Runner, The Giver. Pick your dystopian literature or movie.

All of those stories, dystopian stories, you're not supposed to read them and think, boy, let's make a world like that. No, you walk away from a story like Hunger Games and think, can we make sure the world never gets this way, please?

And I think Job is supposed to be a similar thing where we're meant to read it and think, let's make sure we never answer people's questions with these five answers.

[21 : 14] We're supposed to read the book of Job and say, if this is the best we have for answering the problem of pain and suffering, let's find something else.

Job is written to help us know what's not true about God. So, let's talk about what is true.

Let's talk about what is true. Let's talk about what do we know about God. This would be a good time to remind everyone watching that I believe in the infallibility and the inspiration of Scripture.

when I pick up a Bible, a digital one in my phone or iPad or a physical paper one bounded in leather, when I pick up a Bible, I firmly believe that it is God's inspired word and it is intended to point me towards the person of Jesus Christ.

I also believe in progressive revelation. In other words, God's character is not fully revealed until we get to the person of Jesus Christ.

[22 : 21] So while the Old Testament is to, quote 2 Timothy, useful for instruction and teaching, it was also written by folks who didn't yet know Jesus.

They were limited in their knowledge of what God is really like. Okay, that aside, what do we know about God? Number one, we know that God is love.

It's not merely that God is loving. It's not merely that love is one of God's many characteristics. It's that God is in God's very essence love itself.

You cannot make a distinction between who God is and what love is. It's not that God existed and decided to be loving. It is an essential part of God's character and being.

God cannot not be love. We get this from 1 John chapter 4. We have a bunch of different phrases in this chapter. It says that love comes from God. Love emanates from the divine being.

[23 : 24] It says God is love. It says it again. God is love. It says whoever lives in love therefore lives in God and God is in them. We know that God is love.

Number two, we know that love means something. We could try to wheezer ourselves out of God's character by saying yes, God is love, but as humans we can't possibly know what that means for God.

Love means something for humans and love means something else for God. So even though we think that a loving parent would stop preventable evil and suffering for their child, maybe God has a different definition of love that we are just not wise enough to know.

We have a problem though in that that's not how scripture talks about love at all. If you want to take the Bible seriously and I do, then you must take how it talks about love seriously.

1 Corinthians 13 of course is the primary example of how the Bible talks about and defines love.

Love is patient and kind. It's not envious. It's not boastful. It's not arrogant.

[24 : 29] It's not rude. I bulleted this one because it's important for our purposes. Listen, it does not insist on its own way. In other words, it's not coercive. It's not irritable. It's not resentful.

It does not rejoice in wrongdoing. Love, God is love. Love cannot call something evil good. It rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. Thomas Lord defines love like this. He says, love is purposeful action that aims to do good. Love advances well-being.

It fosters flourishing, abundant life, and blessedness. And this is the love that we find characteristic of God. The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament affirm that God takes no delight in suffering. We see this in Ezekiel chapter 18. Do I take pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord? Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live? Ezekiel 18 flies in the face of Job that says that God punishes.

[25 : 31] Ezekiel 18, for I take no pleasure in the death of anyone. 1 Timothy 2, God our Savior wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

2 Peter 3, the Lord is not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. Love means something, and in the least it means not wanting people to die.

Keep going. Number three, we know that God can't do certain things. Again, if you want to take the Bible seriously, and I want to take the Bible very seriously, we must take what it says seriously about what God cannot do.

Let me give you some examples. Titus 1 says God cannot lie. James 1 says God cannot be tempted and cannot tempt anyone. Isaiah 40, God cannot grow tired.

2 Timothy 2, God cannot deny God's self. God can't decide that his character is going to change one day from the next. There are also philosophical or logical implications of what God can and can't do.

[26 : 35] He can't do what is logically impossible or self-contradictory. God can't stop existing. God can't sin. God can't make a married bachelor. God can't make a triangular circle.

It's not a limit on God's power. It's a fact that logic and reason itself emanates from God's being, so he can't contradict himself. Okay, stay with me.

We know that God is knowable through Jesus. We can know what God is like. To say things like God's ways are not our ways, that God cannot be knowable, his definition of love and good is different than ours, denies the work and the teaching of Jesus.

Philip said once, John 14, Lord, show us the Father. And Jesus answered, and you can hear the exasperation in his voice, Don't you know me, Philip? Even after I have been among you for such a long time, anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.

How can you say, show us the Father? Anyone that says God's ways are unknowable is ignoring what Jesus says here. Now listen, do I think that we can know everything there is to know about God?

[27 : 42] Of course not. God is infinite, we are finite, but we can't say that God is unknowable or that we don't know what love means or how love behaves. It's a fair question, back to our 90s wristband heyday, to ask what would Jesus do?

Because that should reveal God's character. So, let's imagine what Jesus would do if he found you experiencing the worst pain of your life. You've been assaulted, your child has passed away, you've got a life-ending diagnosis, you've been discriminated against because of the color of the skin or the gender of the person that you love.

Can you imagine Jesus saying to you, I'm here with you, I could stop this pain, but I think it's better that I stand by and allow it?

Did Jesus ever say that to anyone he encountered? No! The Bible says, God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power and he went around doing good and healing all who are under the power of the devil because God was with him.

Jesus only ever worked to prevent and stop suffering and death. Not once did Jesus increase it or stand by while it happened.

[28 : 58] Sometimes people wouldn't let Jesus do good and at the end of Jesus' life, Jesus allowed suffering to happen to himself for the sake of the world. But Jesus, showing God's character, only ever worked to increase well-being, shalom, wholeness, peace in the world.

In other words, Jesus always acted out of love. So, what do we know about God? We know that God is love. Not that just God is loving, but he is in fact love.

That love means something. We can define it. We can get our minds around it. We know that God can't do certain things, that God, not limiting his power, but because of who he is, can't sin, can't lie, can't grow tired.

We know who God is because of Jesus. So, why is there then still pain and suffering and genuine irredeemable evil in the world?

If we know that God is love, if we know that love always seeks out well-being and shalom, and if we know that love is uncontrolling and non-coercive, it does not seek its own way, according to 1 Corinthians 13, and if we know that genuine evil occurs, the only logical conclusion, and I would say biblical conclusion, is that God can't prevent evil single-handedly.

[30 : 26] There are some things that a loving God cannot do, and unilaterally, coercively, single-handedly preventing evil is one of those things.

There is a massive difference between God won't and God can't, and this is why we are naturally repulsed by the God character, little g, in the first couple chapters of Job.

The God character allows the Satan to kill Job's kids, inflict disease, destroy nature. A God who stands by and allows pointless pain and suffering cannot be accurately described as perfectly loving.

And remember, I think that's what the author of Job wants us to come away with when we read those heavenly courtroom scenes. We're not supposed to come away and think, oh, well, God let the devil kill my children, assault me, give me cancer, create coronavirus, so God's off the hook. The ancient readers of Job weren't stupid, and we're, I don't think we are either. But, if God is always perfectly loving and always working to maximize the good in the world, and by his loving nature cannot coercively, single-handedly, unilaterally make his creation obey his will, then we might just have a more accurate picture of God in our minds.

[31 : 53] God doesn't always get what he wants. We're going to talk about this for the rest of the month, because I'm sure some minds just went, and that was a lot to cover, but that lays the groundwork for how we're going to talk about God and his character for the rest of the month of May.

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