

God Redeems

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[0 : 0 0] We are continuing in our series on the book of Job and we're going to start with some review, talk about where we've been and then where we're going to go in. We have this week and next week talking about the book of Job. Next week we will be back actually live and we're going to have a little bit of Q&A.; So be thinking about questions you want to ask about the book of Job, problems of pain and suffering and where is God in the midst of all of this. And we will have our final sermon on the book of Job next week and then do some interaction, some Q&A; using the chat and live stream and all of the technology that we have available to us. So let's begin with some review. We are working through the book of Job under the assumption that it was written to be intentionally unsatisfying. That, you know, I've heard the advice given that if you're going through a hard time, if you're going through pain and suffering and loss and a pandemic, that read the book of Job, you'll find it comforting. I personally find that really bad advice because I think the book of Job was written to be intentionally unsatisfying. We have all of these potential answers thrown at us in the book of Job and none of them really seem to ring true or to really get at the heart of our questions as to why there's pain, why there's suffering, why is there evil in the world and why God would let any of that happen. And I think the author of the book of Job wasn't stupid and we aren't either and that we're not meant to read this as an answer book, but rather as a book of what not to say, of what is not the answer to the problem of pain and suffering. And I think it's important that we recognize that because as Christians, believers, Jesus followers, we have a responsibility to speak of God well and to speak of God truly. I believe that following Jesus is the best possible way to live. And because of that belief, I want to tell others about it. I want to tell others about Jesus. I want other people to follow this way of life and to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior and friend because it's the best possible way to live. And if I can't explain why, if I can't give a reasonable explanation as to why the world is the way it is, what is true about God, if I can't do that, then I'm not doing myself any favors and I'm not doing my friends and my family who don't know Jesus any favors because I can't talk truly about God. A couple Bible verses about this. 1 Peter chapter 3 says, if anyone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it, but do this in a gentle and respectful way. So a couple questions. When's the last time you've been asked about your hope as a believer? Are you living in such a way, are you following Jesus in such a way in which people are inspired to ask you, why do you have this hope? Then question number two is, can you explain this hope in a reasonable and gentle and respectful way? Colossians 4, same idea. Conduct yourselves wisely towards outsiders, those who don't yet know Jesus, those who aren't part of a church or maybe they were and they've left it because the church wounded them. Now listen, we cannot, we do not shape our theology, our beliefs, our thoughts about God around other people's preferences or our own. When we do that, that's idolatry. That's what idolatry is. We make God into our own image. But we want to make sure that what we say about God is true and accurate. Or otherwise, we will be pushing people unnecessarily away from Jesus and away from God. And it's incredible that God gives me and gives you that much power and authority in the world. God calls us as regents, his stewards, his co-heirs, and God allows us to represent him to everyone else. Which means that we better do the work of making sure

that we're speaking truly and representing God well. So as we kind of round the basis of this series on the book of Job, I may say some things that might make you uncomfortable about your theology, about your conceptions about God. And honestly, I'm okay with that. I'm okay with making you uncomfortable.

Theologian Clark Pinnock put it like this. He said, Rather than worry about our discomfort, perhaps we should be concerned about God's reputation. How can we expect Christians to delight in God or outsiders to seek God if we portray God in biblically flawed, rationally suspect, and existentially repugnant ways? In other words, if we feel a little uneasy about what we're trying to figure out about God because we were brought up in a theology that locked God into a box and we're trying to break God out of that box.

If we feel uncomfortable, that's okay. What matters is speaking what's true about God and making sure that it rationally makes sense and it doesn't make God out to be a moral monster.

So that's our goal. That's what we're talking about. So Job, written to be intentionally unsatisfying. It's a book that gives us all of the wrong answers, the answers that we need to avoid, the answers that we are not going to use when people ask, why is the world as bad as it is?

[5 : 39] So let's review some of those answers. Five bad solutions. Number one, God allows. Any sentence that starts with God allows might be a little suspect. God allowed you to go through that traumatic experience. God allowed your parents or your grandparents to pass away. God allowed this pain and suffering. And we see this logic in the book of Job in the courtroom scene, the Satan, the accuser, that God gives free reign to kill Job's kids, to cause natural disasters, all of those things. God stands back and allows it to happen. That's bad solution number one. Bad solution number two, any statement that starts with at least. Well, at least you have heaven to look forward to. Well, at least you didn't die from this traumatic thing that happened in your life.

Well, at least God used it to teach you something good. At least, at least, at least. And we see this in the happy ending last chapter of the book of Job where Job gets, you know, twice the amount of cattle and he gets the same amount of kids back and he's twice as rich. And this is a bad solution.

One, it's nothing that you should ever say to someone. Well, at least, you know, blah, blah, blah. Or it's also rarely the way the world works. You don't get twice the amount of blessing for every bit of pain that happens. Bad solution number three is the idea of God punishes. And Becky did a wonderful, beautifully comforting way of talking about this last week where we often ask the question when there's pain and suffering, who's at fault? Who do we blame? And we too often want to blame ourselves or we want to blame the person who's going through the bad experience. And that goes up to this theology, the idea that God punishes those who deserve it and God only blesses those who deserve it.

It's this vending machine God. It's the idea of yin and yang and karma and all of that. And we see this in Job's friends. This is what Job's friends believe. They believe in a basically not a God, but a principle, a principle at work in the world that says if you're good, you get good things. If you're bad, you get bad things. And again, this is rarely the way the world works. It is a terrible thing to say to someone going through pain and suffering. And it's also not true. It's not biblically true at all.

Our biblical solutions to these bad solutions we've talked about so far, we are willing to say that there are things that God cannot do. God can't lie. He can't get tired. He can't tempt anybody. God can't sin. And God also cannot unilaterally control the world. God is love. God is not just loving, but is love itself. And love is necessarily, essentially uncontrolling, non-coercive. God can't force anybody or anything to do anything. God is a God that woos and that is in relationship with us. God does not coerce. So God can't single-handedly prevent pain and suffering and evil. At least statements are unempathetic. And so we believe in a God who feels. A God that showed up in the person of Jesus Christ, who was born, who lived, who endured every temptation that humans endure, who suffered, and who died. And so God feels with us. God is not distant. God is not far off. God is a God that feels.

[9 : 25] And then this week we're going to talk about two things, two facts about God. That God always is working to heal. And that God's ways are ways of redemption, of making things better. A bad solution is saying God's ways are not our ways. We can't understand what God is like. We can't say anything true about God because God is so far above us, so far beyond, that we can't possibly limit God.

And what scripture says is that, no, God is knowable. God is a God that we can understand. Can we understand everything there is to know about God? No, of course not. God is infinite. We are finite. God is eternal. We are timely. But that does not mean that God is un-understandable, that we can't say anything true about God. And so we believe in a God who is always working to heal, and a God that redeems. We believe that God does not cause suffering. That God does not allow suffering. That God is only ever working to heal, and to prevent, and to stop, and to bring good out of the suffering that his creation brings about. God never intends evil. Evil isn't part of some divine conspiracy to make you better, to teach you a lesson. That is not what God is like, and that's what we're going to talk about today.

So, part two, let's ask the question, does God heal? And to begin with, I want to throw this to the chat room for a moment and spend a little bit of time discussing. So, here's the question. What have been some of your experiences or questions with miraculous healing and healing prayer? What have been some of your experiences or questions about miraculous healing or healing prayer? So, when you pray for someone to get better, to not be sick, to experience healing, what's happened? And what are some of your questions around those kinds of prayers? So, I'm going to throw it to the chat, and then we'll come back and pick it up from there.

All right. So, again, this is pre-recorded. So, me in the future just had a conversation with you. Me in the past doesn't know what me in the future talked about, but I have some guesses, and I have some of my own questions and thoughts about healing and healing prayer.

Why doesn't God heal more often? Is healing a matter of having enough faith or not having enough faith? Why are some healed and some aren't? Why do we add phrases like, if it's your will, to the end of prayers? I've also wondered about, you know, if so many people prayed for grandma and she didn't get better, should we have had 80 people pray for grandma and she would have gotten better? Things like that. Lots and lots of questions around healing prayer. So, let's begin with what's true, what scripture says about God. God loves everyone and everything at all times, smallest to largest.

[12 : 27] God loves everyone and everything at all times, smallest to largest. It is never not, double negative here. It is never not God's intention to heal and to redeem. I'll say it again. It is never not God's intention to heal and to redeem. We don't have to add phrases like, if it's your will, to prayers about healing and the world getting better. It is always God's will to reduce suffering, to heal, and to prevent evil. Always. And let me tell you how I know this is true. Take a look at the book of Luke chapter 6. This is Jesus talking, He says, So, if Jesus expects his followers to love you, love those who love them. Love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. But love your enemies. Do good to them. And then you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. So, if Jesus expects his followers to love their enemies, to do good to their enemies, why would we think that God doesn't behave in the same way? If Jesus expects us to love those who are against us, and Jesus makes it clear, even sinners love people that love them, even people who don't know Jesus, who don't follow

God, who don't really have any sort of moral, ethical compass, whatever, even they will love people who love them and do good to people who do good to them. Certainly, God's better than that, right? So, the command to love enemies and to do good to them, this comes from God and it applies to God. Matthew 5 makes it explicit. We are to be perfect, to be whole in our love, just as God is perfect, is complete in who he loves. God sends rain and sunshine upon the innocent and the guilty.

It says that we will be children of the Most High, we will be heirs of God, of the King, because God himself is kind to the ungrateful and to the wicked. And so, we can say something like God loves everyone and everything at all times, smallest to largest, because if that's what Jesus expects of us, and if that is what is true of Jesus, then of course it's true of God. As I've said before in this series, God is at least as nice as Jesus is, at least as kind, at least as loving. God is always at work, everywhere, healing to the utmost possible. There was a dot, dot, dot after that sentence, given the circumstances. And we'll talk about that given the circumstances as we go along.

But that's what's important to know, that God is more capable of loving everyone than we are, that the command that Jesus gives to his people to love everyone always is true of God himself.

So, how does God heal? How does God heal? If we can say that God is always working to heal, how does God accomplish that? And we're going to say, we're going to answer that biblically by saying that God works alongside people and creation. God works alongside people and creation. This is how God heals. The classic ancient Christian writers of centuries past, the first centuries of the church, called this the cooperative grace of God. There's the grace of God that is before the universe was created. God's grace that always intended to come near to us, that always intended good things for us. There's that side of God's grace, but there's also the cooperative side of God's grace.

[16 : 44] God's grace does not coerce. It does not unilaterally force itself upon us. God's grace cooperates with us to bring about his will. To get a little philosophical for a second, so pardon the technical language, but hopefully this makes sense. God is the necessary cause of all things. There could not be anything that exists without God. God is the necessary cause of all things. And God is the necessary cause of healing. Healing is only possible because of God's necessary and cooperative grace, but it is not the sufficient cause. Meaning that nothing can be healed without God, but God cannot heal without creation's cooperation. God is the necessary cause. No healing can happen without God, but healing has to include creation's cooperation. I'll give you an example of this. Colossians chapter 1 talks about it this way.

Through Christ, God reconciled everything to himself. So this is God's necessary grace. The fact that reconciliation of creation cannot happen without God getting involved. But Colossians 1 continues, but you must continue to believe this truth and to stand firmly in it. That's the sufficient cause.

Yes, God moves towards us. God is the first mover. He is the initiator of the divine and human relationship of the divine and the creation being reconciled together, having peace and shalom in their relationship. But God can't do that single-handedly. God needs us to respond to his grace. We must continue to believe in this truth, believe in God's reconciling grace. It's necessary that God works to reconcile everything. Without God's grace, without God's working, reconciliation could not happen. But we can't be reconciled to God without our cooperation. God will never force himself upon us. That would not be loving. God enables our cooperation, but he does not coerce it. So when we hear questions like, well, did God heal you or did a doctor do it? That's actually a false choice. We don't have to choose between did God heal us or a doctor heal us. When we find through healing, through doctors or counseling or medicine or nutrition, God and people are working together for healing. That's the only way healing ever happens. And so we're willing to say that God cannot heal single-handedly. If God could, then he should. If God could heal single-handedly, if God were capable of fixing everything instantly, then it would be logical to think that that is precisely what God ought to be doing right now.

But we believe, and I believe that scripture teaches, that God can't do it single-handedly. Because to do it single-handedly would be coercive and it would be unloving. It would take away creation, creatures, humans, people's ability to choose and to cooperate with God. It would be negligent and unfair for God to be able to heal and decide not to do it. But I don't think that's the case. I believe that God necessarily cannot heal single-handedly. We need to respond to God's healing power. God healing single-handedly assumes a controlling God. And it assumes a God that without rhyme or reason sometimes intervenes and sometimes doesn't to bring healing. And it seems that God is stingy with that intervention because he only does it occasionally and not very often. And so that means our prayer lives have to be about begging and pleading and forcing and just hoping that God will do something to intervene into the world and make things better. If 70 people had prayed for grandma, maybe she'd be better, but we only had 68. Something like that. Let's talk about the word intervene here for a moment. Intervene. Definition. To intentionally become involved in a difficult situation in order to improve it or prevent it from getting worse. You know what the problem is with the word intervene when it comes to God. It assumes that God wasn't involved in the first place. It places God out there and needing to step into in here. And that is just not how scripture talks about God. Psalm 139. This is actually from the RSV, so it's an old-timey language, but I just love the poetry of it.

Wither shall I go from thy spirit? Wither. There's a word we should use more often. And whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there. If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me and thy right hand shall hold me. Or again, Colossians 1.

[22 : 15] It says, The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him, all things in heaven on earth were created. Things visible and invisible, whether thrones, dominions, rulers, powers, all things have been created through him and for him. He, the Son, Christ himself is before all things. And listen, listen, in him, all things hold together.

This is how the classical church thought of God. This is Augustine writing. He writes, God is not distributed through space by size, so that half of God should be in the half of the world and half of God in the other half of the world. No, no, no, no, no. Augustine writes, God is wholly present in all of it. God is not confined in any place, but wholly in God's self everywhere. Classical writers spoke that every particle, the smallest bit of creation, every smallest bit of creation contains all of God. And so we cannot accurately speak of God intervening, of being out there and needing to come in here. That is just not how the Bible, it's not how the ancient church thought of God and his presence. I forget who said this quote. It wasn't me, but someone once said, perhaps the number one way to improve our prayer lives is to rid ourselves of the thought that God is out there. So I think we need to be able to say that God does not intervene, because that assumes that God is somewhere else to begin with, and that's simply not true. God is always, already, fully present. And God is always at work everywhere, healing to the utmost possible, given the circumstances. So that leads us to part four. Why doesn't God heal more?

Well, remember what we said earlier. God cannot heal single-handedly. We, I know I, too often think of God's healing as a zap healed. But miracles, and listen, I do believe in miracles, but miracles are neither the work of God or creation alone. God works to heal, and he invites cooperation from all parts and particles of creation. And this is the hard part. Sometimes creation refuses. Sometimes creation refuses. Thomas Ord, the author of the book *God Can't*, which a lion share of my research for this series came out of Thomas Ord's work, and this particular book *God Can't*, he writes this. He says, Our cells, organs, molecules, tissues, bones, and other bodily aspects have capacities of their own, and neither God nor our mind controls them fully. Again, this goes into what's true of God. If God is love, and if love is necessarily uncontrolling and non-coercive, then God cannot control us.

Now, I think some of you probably at this point are getting a little iffy about what I'm saying right now. Because we're used to speaking about God in superficially large language. God is omnipotent.

There is nothing that God cannot do. And I believe that God can do all that is logically possible. I believe that God is almighty, that God is the necessary cause of all existence, that God created the world, that God, in him we live and move and have our being. The world cannot exist without God's almighty, omnipotent power. But God can only do what is logically possible. And it is not logically possible for an all-loving, non-coercive God to suddenly coerce, to control single-handedly the world and the things in the world, including us, including oceans and pandemics and natural disasters.

[26 : 36] That makes God's power into something that is coercive and unloving. Remember Clark Pinnock, rather than worry about our discomfort, perhaps we should be concerned about God's reputation. How can we expect Christians to delight in God or outsiders to seek God if we portray God in biblically flawed, rationally suspect, and existentially repugnant ways? If God were capable of getting rid of the evil and suffering in the world, then he should. We understand that innately.

But if God is all-loving and non-coercive, then God can't control. If God is love and love is uncontrolling, then God's work of healing can be refused by things outside of our and God's control.

An example of this, in Jesus's own ministry, Mark chapter 6, says that Jesus could not do any miracles in Nazareth except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith. There was a place at a city and a population where Jesus could not perform miracles.

Jesus, God in the flesh, God incarnate, God almighty, Jesus Christ, couldn't do miracles because they wouldn't cooperate. Now listen, listen, listen, listen. I want to get something straight. I don't want anybody to misunderstand me. Saying God needs our cooperation does not mean that everyone who is not healed has failed to cooperate. I am not trying to tell you that if you did not experience healing, it's because you didn't have enough faith. That is not what I'm saying.

If someone tells you that you just need to have more faith, then you have my permission to punch them and tell them to have more faith that it will feel better soon, okay? That is harmful and wrong and disastrous theology. What I am saying is that even if we, in our wills and our consciousness, want to cooperate with God, we have faith and we believe in God's miraculous healing power, it doesn't mean that there are other forces within our bodies and outside of our bodies, within the world, who also want to cooperate with God's power. We may desire healing, but God can't even coerce a cancer cell to do something that's against the cancer cell's nature. God can't coerce the people around us who make us experience trauma and hurt and heartache. God can't coerce them either.

[29 : 11] God is a all-loving, non-coercive God. God is always at work to bring healing, and there are other ways that God can be at work that are non-coercive and uncontrolling. God has the ability to influence and to woo and to use cooperative grace to bring healing and wholeness into the world. Just because we're saying that God can't heal single-handedly doesn't mean that I'm saying that God isn't working to heal.

Just because I'm saying that God does not coerce or take control doesn't mean that God isn't working and wooing and asking for cooperation. And I think, I don't know, when I've been struggling with these ideas, it reminds me of how small-minded I can be to think that for God to be powerful, it means that power has to equal taking charge, taking control. There are other ways that power can be shown through wooing, through asking for cooperation. That's how God does his work. God is never the cause of suffering or evil to bring healing or maturity. God is a good, good parent, and the way that he brings us to maturity is not violent. It's not cruel. We recognize bad parenting and abusive parenting as fallen human beings. Certainly, God is capable of parenting us and maturing us in ways that are not abusive and cruel. God, however, is capable of using suffering and evil to bring something good out of it.

And that's probably the most miraculous part of God's healing grace, of God's healing work. That even when creation and people and the world rebels against God's good intentions, God is still wise and almighty enough to take rebellion and squeeze something good out of it.

And so, our bad solutions. God allows pain and suffering? No, it's not that God allows. It's that God is essentially uncontrolling. God can't prevent pain and evil and suffering because God gave freedom to the world and cannot take that freedom back. That would make God unloving. We'd never say at least and think that's a good enough answer. Rather, we believe in a God of empathy who feels with us. God doesn't punish.

God is always in the work of redemption. God desires that no one should perish. God's work is kind. God's ways are not our ways. It's basically a way of appealing to mystery and saying, well, we can't really know what God is up to. When scripture tells us what God is up to. God is working to heal. God is working to bring shalom and wholeness and justice into the world. So, a few takeaways. Number one, you don't have to add, if it's your will, to your prayers. You can trust that it is always God's will to heal and to bring restoration and good into your life. Number two, God has never intervened in your life. Put that on a t-shirt.

[32 : 52] God has never intervened in your life because God never left. God has been present the entire time. Number three, you don't have to worry. You do not have to worry, friends, that God brought suffering into your life to teach you a lesson. God's discipline is never abusive. God's discipline is always restorative, non-coercive, and non-violent. God is always, only, ever working for your good. Would you pray with me?

Father, Son, and Spirit, Triune God, I thank you that you are better than I could ever imagine. That you, in your love, will not take away the freedom that you have granted us.

And God, we lament and we repent from the ways that we have abused that freedom. And God, we lament the brokenness of this world, which creates natural disasters and pandemics, the things that we know grieve your heart. And so, Triune God, we ask that we may join you in your work of redemption, that we may cooperate with your healing grace so that this world may once again know complete and utter shalom and wholeness and peace. And in all the ways that we rebel, and all the ways that we refuse your cooperative grace, we repent. And for all the ways that we are wounded by those who refuse your grace, we ask for your healing to work swiftly. God, we need you. We rely on you. And we thank you that you never left us. We don't have to wait for you to show up, because you are always here. You are always near. We pray these things in the unity of the Holy Spirit and in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Amen.