

God and Human Suffering



SABBATH—OCTOBER 15

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Romans 1:18–20; Job 12:7–10; Revelation 4:11; Colossians 1:16, 17; Matthew 6:34; Job 10:8–12; Romans 3:1–4.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘So don't [do not] worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own' ” (Matthew 6:34, NIV).

UNLIKE EVERY OTHER BOOK OF THE BIBLE, the book of Job does not speak at all about the land and people of Israel. But this omission (thing left out) is not the case with the rest of the Bible. For example, in Genesis the Lord makes Abram a promise that He “will make of thee [Abram] a great nation” (Genesis 12:2). And in Revelation, John describes God's plan for “the holy city,” Jerusalem (Revelation 22:19). Throughout the Bible, God is directly or indirectly involved in His relationship with His people, and His influence is felt in each book of the Bible.

But in the book of Job, nothing is said about that at all. Nor is anything said about the Exodus.¹ Why? One reason is that when Moses wrote Job in Midian, along with Genesis, the Exodus had not happened yet (read *The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 3, page 1140).

But perhaps there is another reason, even more important. One of the key themes of Job is human suffering. It is worldwide. It is not limited to any one group of people or one time. Jew or Gentile (non-Jew), we all have experienced something of Job's sufferings, of the pain of life in a sinful world. Job's pain represents us all in our sufferings.

DEFINITIONS

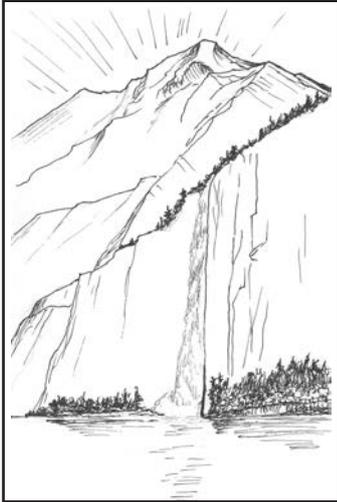
1. Exodus—the time that God, through Moses, delivered His people the Israelites from Egypt.

GOD IN NATURE (Romans 1:18–20)

Read Romans 1:18–20. What is Paul saying here?

What a powerful few sentences. There is so much proof of God in the created world that people will be “without excuse” (NASB) for their unbelief. Paul is saying that from the creation alone humans can learn enough to know that God is real and that He has the right to be their Judge.

No question, the natural world gives much proof to us that God is real. Modern science, too, has shown us details about the wonders of Creation that people three thousand years ago, or even just three hundred years ago, could not have begun to imagine. There is an interesting idea to keep in mind here too: the more that science finds out about the mysteries of life, the less science is able to say that life is here by accident and chance. For example, an iPhone looks designed, acts designed, shows design both inside and out, and works only through design; and it really *is* designed. A human being (person) also looks designed, acts designed, shows design both inside and out, and works only through design; yet, we are told that it is made by pure chance alone. Sadly, many people are deceived (tricked) into believing such claims.



The created world gives us proof that God is real.

Read Job 12:7–10. How do the words here show the idea given in Romans 1:18–20?

So we are told that the created world gives us proof that God is real. In its sinful condition, nature does not show the full character (thoughts; feelings; actions) of God. But it certainly shows His creative power and other parts of His goodness too.

What things in nature speak to you of the power and goodness of God? How can you learn to receive strength and encouragement from the message these things give you?

NOTHING CAME FROM ITSELF (Colossians 1:16, 17)

There are many good and powerful arguments that God is real. The created world itself gives a strong testimony to this fact. Plus, there is what is called the “cosmological”² argument. It is the idea that nothing came from itself and that nothing created itself. Instead, what was created was created by something else before it. And whatever created that had to be created by something else before it. And this cycle³ goes on and on until we stop at something uncreated, something that has always been there. It is something that *never* was *not* there. And who else would that be but the God of the Bible?

What do Revelation 4:11; Colossians 1:16, 17; and John 1:1–3 teach us about the beginning of all things?

These verses teach what is really the most sensible explanation for the Creation—an eternal God. Some thinkers are opposed to the idea of God. They have come up with another suggestion. Instead of an all-powerful and eternal God who created the universe, we are told that “nothing” created it. One such person who opposes the idea of a Creator God is a famous scientist named Stephen Hawking. Hawking now sits in the chair of power that Isaac Newton⁴ once occupied. Hawking argues that “nothing” created the universe.

“Because there is a law like gravity the universe can and will create itself from nothing.”—Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Random House, 2010), page 180.

Hawking surely has plenty of deep and difficult math to describe his idea. But one has to wonder: here we are, a good four hundred years since the beginning of the scientific revolution. And one of the world’s best scientists is arguing that the universe and all that is in it came *from nothing*? Error is error, even when spoken by a great scientist.

With this in mind, read 1 Corinthians 3:19. Why is it always so important for Christians to keep the truth of this verse before us?

DEFINITIONS

2. cosmological—dealing with the scientific study of the origin and structure of the universe.
3. cycle—a set of events or actions that happen again and again in the same order; a repeating series of events or actions.
4. Isaac Newton—an English scientist and mathematician. He was one of the greatest scientists of all time. He was born on January 4, 1643, and died on March 31, 1727.

THE EARLIEST OF BOOKS (Matthew 6:34)



Moses wrote the book of Job during his long years of being alone in the desert of Midian.

As we saw yesterday, there are many who do not believe in God. But those who believe in God have many good reasons for their belief. Yet, there has been one stubborn problem that many unbelievers have used for hundreds of years to excuse their disbelief. That is the problem of human suffering and evil. How can God be all-good, all-loving, and all-powerful, and evil be real? This question has been and remains a stumbling block to many. But if we are really honest, what believer in God, who has tasted and experienced the truth of God and His love, has not struggled at times with that question?

How interesting, then, that Ellen G. White also taught what Jewish tradition teaches: that Moses wrote Job in Midian. Both Ellen G. White and Jewish history support (approve; teach) this idea: “The long years of being alone in the desert were not lost. Moses gained a preparation for the great work before him, and also, with the leading of the Holy Spirit, he wrote the book of Genesis and also the book of Job. These books would be read with the deepest interest by the people of God until the close of time.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 3, page 1140.

What this tells us is that Job, one of the first two books of the Bible ever written, deals with the worldwide issue of human pain and suffering. God knew that the question of human suffering would be a big problem for humans. So right from the start, in the Bible, God has Moses in Midian write the story of Job. God lets us know, early on, that we are not left alone in our pain and suffering but that He is there. He knows all about it, and we can have the hope that He will make it right in the end.

Read Matthew 6:34; John 16:33; Daniel 12:1; and Matthew 24:7. What do these verses teach us about how real evil is?

The Bible teaches that an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving God is real. But it also teaches that evil, human suffering, and sadness are real too. Evil is not an excuse to disbelieve in God. In fact, a quick reading of the book of Job shows that even when he is full of grief and sadness, Job never questions that God is real. Instead, the question is, Why are these things happening to him?

It is only natural to have questions about the evil we experience. How can we learn to trust in the goodness of God no matter what happens?

THE PUZZLING PROBLEM (Job 6:4–8)

Read Job 6:4–8 and Job 9:1–12. What issue is Job wrestling with? What question does he *not* ask?

As yesterday’s study shows, the book of Job never questions that God is real. Instead, the question is, Why is Job going through these troubles? Thinking over all the things that happen to Job, it certainly is a fair question. After all, Job believes in God. But what about those who do not? For example, suppose someone was an atheist.⁵ An atheist could say that an explanation for suffering and hardship was clear and simple. After all, he or she would say, we live in a meaningless and purposeless world that cares nothing about us. So with cold and uncaring people and cruel nature around us, we sometimes are the victims of suffering that serves no purpose. How could it? If life itself serves no purpose, then the troubles that come with that life must be just as meaningless.

Many might find this answer unsatisfying and hopeless. Yet, it would make sense if there were no God. But for someone like Job, the question is different.

Read Job 10:8–12. How do these verses help us to understand the terrible questions that Job is wrestling with?

Yes, the question that Job is wrestling with is the same one that most believers in God have wrestled with and still do wrestle with. If a good and loving God is real, why do humans suffer the things that they do? Why do even “good” people, such as Job, suffer? And why does their suffering seem to have no meaning? Again, if the universe were without God, the answer would be clear and simple: we suffer because we live in a cold and uncaring world in which human beings are made by accident.

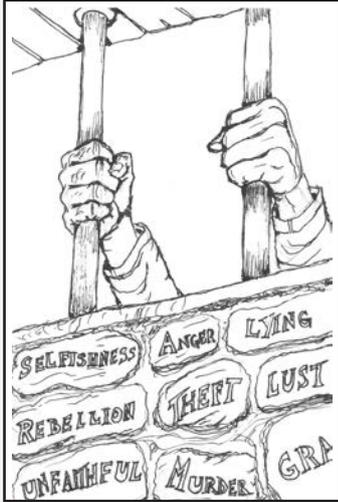
Job knows better than that. We do too, and that is why we struggle with the question of suffering.



If God is loving and real, why do good people suffer?

DEFINITIONS

5. atheist—a person who does not believe that God exists.

THEODICY⁶ (Romans 3:1–4)

At the judgment, the fruits of laying aside God's law will be made clear.

DEFINITIONS

6. theodicy—the argument that God is good and all-powerful even though there is evil in the world.

Read Romans 3:1–4. At face value, the meaning of these verses is the unfaithfulness of some of God's people. But what is the bigger issue that Paul is talking about here? What is Paul saying about God?

Quoting Psalm 51:4, Paul talks about how the Lord Himself is “right when you sentence me [Paul]. You [God] are fair when you judge me” (Romans 3:4, NIV). The idea given here is a theme that appears in different places in the Bible. It is called theodicy. It is the question of understanding the goodness of God in the face of evil. It is the age-old question that we have been studying all week. In fact, the whole great controversy itself is really a theodicy. Before humans, before angels, before the whole universe, the goodness of God will be made clear, even though there is evil in the world.

“Every question of truth and error in the long-standing controversy [war between Christ and Satan] has now been made clear. The results of rebellion [war against God], the fruits of setting aside God's law and principles [important rules], have been laid open to the view of all created angels and people in the universe. The working out of Satan's rule and God's government has been presented to the whole universe. Satan's own works have shown him to be guilty. God's name, His wisdom, His justice, and His goodness have been cleared of false charges [blame]. It is seen that all God's dealings in the great controversy have been done for the eternal good of His people and the good of all the worlds that He has created.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pages 670, 671.

This idea might be hard for us to understand now in a world of sin and suffering. If it is hard for us, imagine what Job must have thought! But when it is all over, we will be able to know the goodness and justice and love and fairness of God in all His dealings with all humans, with Satan, and with sin. This promise does not mean that everything that happens in the world is good. Clearly it is not. But the promise means that God is dealing with sin and suffering in the world in the best way possible. And then when this terrible experience with sin is over, we will be able to shout: “Lord God who rules over all, everything you do is great and wonderful. King of the ages, your ways are true and fair!” (Revelation 15:3, NIV).

Why is it so important to be praising God, even now, even during the troubles that seem so hard to accept and carry?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: Christian writer C. S. Lewis wrote a book about the death of his wife and his struggle to accept her death. In it he writes:

“Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such terrible things about Him. The conclusion I fear is not ‘So there is no God after all.’ Instead, I fear, ‘So this is what God’s [God is] really like. Deceive yourself no longer.’”—Adapted from *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), pages 6, 7. This, too, is the question Job himself struggles with. As we found, Job never doubts that God is real. What he struggles with is the question of the character of God. Job has faithfully served the Lord. Job has been a “good” man. He knows that he does not deserve the bad things that are happening to him. So he asks the question that so many people who believe in God ask when bad things happen: *What is God really like?* And is not the search for an answer to this question what the great controversy is really about? So much is involved in solving the problem of the great controversy. But there is no question about the death of Jesus on the cross. The Son of God “gave himself up for us. He was a sweet-smelling offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2, NIV). More than anything else, He shows the universe the true character of our Creator.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 Think deeply about the question of suffering for those who do not believe in God. As we found, they do not have to struggle with the same questions that believers in God do when facing deeply sad and terrible events. But what hope do they have of ever getting or finding answers? Imagine going through all that we go through here in this world only to believe that it all ends in the grave, without any hope afterward. No wonder so many unbelievers are upset about life or about finding any meaning to life. Worldly books and papers are filled with complaints about how meaningless it all is. How can we, among our sorrows here, receive hope from our faith, despite the difficult questions that remain?
- 2 Why is it so important for us, right now, to think deeply about the Cross? The Cross is the most powerful example we have of God’s love and of what God is like. When we are filled with sorrow, what does the Cross tell us about the character of God? When we remember the Cross, what hope can we receive for ourselves, whatever we may now face?