

**Job 38 (1984 NIV)*****God's Sovereign Control & Human Suffering*****Introduction**

One time, a pastor friend of mine was preparing his way to study in the US. Part of the standard procedures was to get medical clearance for himself and his family.

During the medical examination, it was detected that his wife had a growth around her chest area. Further tests revealed that she was suffering from lymphoma. She had to go through many months of chemotherapy. The experience was so traumatic that she thought of suicide many times. Many times she cried out to God and asked, "Why?!"

Indeed, when we are suffering pain, the often asked question is "why?"

Job was no different in the account we are looking at today. He lost his children; he lost his health. All these happened to him in spite of the fact that he was called "blameless and upright; feared God and shunned evil" in 1:1. As if to rub salt into his wounds, his friends (not enemies) came and accused him for sinning against God.

We see Job bitterly defending his innocence. He bemoaned the absence of an arbitrator to defend his cause in 9:33. He longed for God to be his witness and advocate in 16:19. He yearned for God to redeem his righteousness in 19:25.

After many chapters of debate between Job and his friends, God eventually confronted Job in Chap. 38. But God did not tell Job the reason why he suffered. There was no discussion about the theology of pain and suffering. God did not even try to answer the charges that Job made before Him. God simply ignored debating on the topic of His justice. Instead, He talked of His sovereignty. Instead of answering Job, He questioned Job's understanding of His divine power and control over all of creation. Indeed, Job was put in his place before God—i.e. to recognise that he was a mere created being before his sovereign Creator.

When we have to suffer pain, we can be guilty of the same presumption like Job. We presume that our pain means that God must owe us an explanation. We presume that our own finite mind can fully understand the infinite mind of God. In so presuming, we are actually questioning His power and control as the Creator of all. But God does not promise easy answers to all our questions about suffering.

So, to help us maintain a proper perspective of suffering, we shall consider some aspects of man's limitations. The first has to do with the fact that ...

## I. **Man's control is limited (vv. 4-21).**

Let's look at 38:4-5, 8-13, 16-19.

4 "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. 5 Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it?"

8 "Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, 9 when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, 10 when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, 11 when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt'? 12 "Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place, 13 that it might take the earth by the edges and shake the wicked out of it?"

16 "Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? 17 Have the gates of death been shown to you? Have you seen the gates of the shadow of death? 18 Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this. 19 "What is the way to the abode of light? And where does darkness reside?"

Here we read God questioning Job on the complexities in governing the universe to reveal man's helplessness in controlling the vast created order. The implication in these verses is that Job cannot do all the things mentioned; that God Himself is the only one who can. Job has no part in creating the earth; neither does he have the power to limit the sea, command the dawn, explore the underworld, nor unravel the mysteries of light and darkness. In his suffering, Job forgets that he is only a created being who is limited by time and space; he forgets that his control is very much limited.

A popular thinking today is that human beings have enormous potential. If a man is determined and tries hard enough, almost nothing is impossible with him. As the saying goes, "The sky is the limit for the one with a can-do spirit." Such a thinking mistakenly reinforces the belief that man has the ability to conquer all the obstacles that he faces in life, in society, in the world, and even in the unknown.

Such a mentality is that of a self-made man who will feel shameful to admit his loss of control and power before others. After all, this self-made man who has risen from nobody to somebody is a greatly admired and esteemed person because he is a "can-do" man; he seems always to be in control and in charge; he is the super achiever and is looked upon as the model of human competence.

But God's words to Job remind us that He (i.e. God) is the only one who never loses control even though man becomes overwhelmed by the majesty and the mystery of the vast universe.

The universe aside, I believe the presence of pain and suffering has never failed to bring us to the awareness of human frailty. Pain and suffering remind us that we are not always in control; that we are finite beings; that we ought not to take ourselves as invincible. We are reminded not to say arrogantly, "I can", but to humbly profess, "I can ... only because of God's grace, love, and mercy." Indeed, pain and suffering call us to submit to God rather than to depend on our own competence.

There are many benefits in knowing a foreign language. And one of these is the increased ability to understand and be understood. If a person only knows one language, then not everything he communicates in that language can be understood by all people all the time. However, if he is to translate an idea into another language, he then has to consider the various possible words to use and their shades of meaning.

Suffering is like knowing a foreign language since things that are usually taken for granted in a normal flow of life must now be thought through in new ways at a time of suffering. It is a time when we are made to realise how often we have taken the frailty of man for granted; how often we mistakenly think we always have things under control.

Yes, God does not promise easy answers to all our questions about suffering. A second aspect of man's limitations we need to realise if we are to keep a proper perspective of suffering is that ...

## **II. Man's comprehension is limited (vv. 22-38).**

Let's now read vv. 22-24 and vv. 31-38.

22 "Have you entered the storehouses of the snow or seen the storehouses of the hail, 23 which I reserve for times of trouble, for days of war and battle? 24 What is the way to the place where the lightning is dispersed, or the place where the east winds are scattered over the earth?"

31 "Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion? 32 Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons or lead out the Bear with its cubs? 33 Do you know the laws of the heavens? Can you set up God's dominion over the earth? 34 "Can you raise your voice to the clouds and cover yourself with a flood of water? 35 Do you send the lightning bolts on their way? Do they report to you, 'Here we are'? 36 Who endowed the heart with wisdom or gave understanding to the mind? 37 Who has the wisdom to count the clouds? Who can tip over the water jars of the heavens 38 when the dust becomes hard and the clods of earth stick together?"

Here, God questions Job on the sustenance of the earth to show man's finiteness in understanding the complex cosmos. The implication in these verses is that Job cannot fully understand the mind of God. God Himself is the

Mastermind behind the whole design of creation. The very system that runs the seasons, constellations, and weather is too baffling for Job to grasp. In his suffering, Job forgets that he is only a created being whose mind can never fathom the Mastermind behind the system that holds all creation together.

Today, we live in a world of knowledge and information. The availability of all kinds of knowledge and information gives us many ready answers about our world. Technology in telecommunications and computer cyberspace can lead us into a never ending expanse of information where we can search and learn to no end. All these resources help and challenge us to analyse, to reason, and to search for answers to many of the complex things in life.

- In this age of knowledge and information, we want to be an expert in our own right; to be able to answer all the why's and how's with confidence and authority.
- In this age of knowledge and information, ignorance is not a bliss but a shame.
- In this age of knowledge and information, we compete with one another to answer more why's and how's.

Perhaps, this is why we often feel so uneasy and anguished when we cannot satisfactorily answer the why's and how's to the questions of pain and suffering.

God's words to Job remind us that we must learn to accept the tension of being able to ask "why" without necessarily knowing the answer. It is alright to be honest with God about our feelings towards pain and suffering. In fact, acknowledging our anger or confusion in our pain and suffering can be a soul-searching experience. It helps us to maintain a proper perspective, and even to release and ease the anger and confusion in us. Conversely, bottling up our anguished emotions is a sure way to emotional breakdown.

However, we are not to ask or question with the belief that we can fully understand all things, or have all the answers. To believe so is to presume to be as wise as God Himself; to have all things figured out so thoroughly that we become God's equal in terms of wisdom and knowledge.

Not knowing all the answers should not make us feel less than human. Modernity may declare that ignorance is a shame because we have vast resources to know and understand as much as we can. But divinity declares that ignorance is only an aspect of true humanity because man's comprehension is limited. Only God is all wise and all knowing.

The wife of my pastor friend, whom I mentioned earlier, did improve after her chemotherapy. But she never knew why she had to suffer in the way she did. In spite of this ignorance, she knew something else very well as shared by her to many people on different occasions—i.e. she knew what it meant to have a first-hand experience trusting in the will of God; not from books or testimonies of others, but from her own struggle with pain and suffering. In that sense, she had become a better and richer

person even though she didn't have all the answers to the why's and how's concerning her traumatic experience.

She prayed and followed through with the medical treatment. That's all she could do and beyond that, she had no control but to trust only in God.

God does not promise easy answers to all our questions about suffering. To help us maintain a proper perspective of suffering, there's a third and final aspect of man's limitations we want to consider today, and that is ...

### **III. Man's concerns are limited (vv. 39-41).**

Let's read the last three verses of Job 38.

39 "Do you hunt the prey for the lioness and satisfy the hunger of the lions 40 when they crouch in their dens or lie in wait in a thicket? 41 Who provides food for the raven when its young cry out to God and wander about for lack of food?"

In these verses, God questions Job on the provision for the animals to expose man's failure in loving the animal kingdom. The implication is that God is caring towards all of His creation. God provides for the lions and the ravens because He has created them. On the contrary, man is exposed to care only for himself; he is largely indifferent towards the needs of animals, wild or tame. Thus, man's concerns are exposed to be only limited to himself and his own needs.

In his suffering, Job has forgotten that God cares for each of His created beings, including Job himself. At the height of his pain and suffering ...

- He has lost almost everything.
- His own friends have come to offer him more condemnation than comfort.
- He begins to wonder aloud, "Is there anyone out there who really cares for me?!"

It is at such a time that God speaks to Job in Chap. 38—"I do care for you ... because I care for every of my created beings, including you."

In our world of efficiency today, we talk in terms of time saving and quick answers/solutions. Naturally, we also want to see God as one who can offer quick cure to life's pain and suffering. When we talk of a powerful God, we are expecting one who can deliver us from our pain and suffering immediately. When this is not forthcoming, we begin to doubt and ask, "Is God really good? Is God really powerful? Has God forgotten me?"

Indeed, God does not always have to show His power by delivering us from pain and suffering, even though we may very much desire and expect Him to do so. Instead, God may choose to show His power by enabling us to go through all the pain and suffering in our weakness BUT with His strength.

God's words to Job remind us that He is personally interested in us, even in our times of pain and suffering. He has not forsaken us in such times. Though He does not tell Job why he suffers, the fact that God speaks to Job is evidence of His presence with Job. God's voice reassures Job that he is not forsaken. Thus, Job is to submit to God in his pain and suffering, and not to fight God.

Indeed, God does not change Job's situation immediately, but He wants Job to change the way he sees his own situation. The problem with man is that his concerns are often limited to himself and his own wants/needs. And when these concerns are threatened, he thinks that everybody is against him, including God. So, he begins to fight everybody, including God. He thinks nobody cares about him and nobody knows about him, including God.

Someone once wrote these beautiful words:

He knows the bitter, weary way;  
 He knows the endless striving day by day;  
 He know how hard the fight has been;  
 The clouds that come over our lives between,  
 The wounds the world hath never seen,  
 He knows.  
 He knows! O thought so full of bliss!  
 For though our joys on earth we miss,  
 We still can bear it, feeling this,  
 He knows!

Yes, God knows what Job has been going through! His voice is a solid indication to Job that He knows, and thus, He cares.

Our human concerns are often limited to ourselves and our own wants/needs. But God's concerns are all embracing—He cares for all of His created beings, and that include you and me. In our times of pain and suffering, we are called to trust in God's sovereign control; to allow God to speak to us not so much in response to our questions, but in accordance to what He has for us to learn.

So, in our times of pain and suffering, let's learn to trust God's control and say, "God, teach me your way for I believe you know and care about what I am going through."

## Conclusion

God does not promise easy answers to all our questions about pain and suffering. However, He is still in sovereign control. If we are going through some pain and suffering today ...

- Remember that our human control, comprehension, and concerns are very narrowed and limited.
- But God's control, comprehension, and concerns are all embracing—He knows and cares for every of His creation, including you and me.

- So, let's seek God to help us trust in His sovereign control, even if you and I do not know all the why's and how's in our predicament.

And if we are ministering to someone going through pain and suffering ...

- Ask God to help us weep with those who are weeping, instead of pretending to know all the answers, or giving all the pet but wrong answers.
- Remember that in such a time, our comforting presence is more valuable than our glib/cheap words to that person.

Amen!