

UNDERSTANDING THE PURPOSE IN PAIN + + +

PASTOR GREG GRIFFITH

Good morning, church. We're continuing our series, *Where's God?* And today, we're asking the question, where's God when there's suffering? Where's God when I'm in pain? And when there doesn't seem to be an end?

What we know is that when dust rises, so do the questions in our lives. And what I want to share today for all of us is a reminder of this: asking the question, "where's God?" isn't a lack of faith. It's actually the beginning of deeper faith. It is good, it is healthy, and it is necessary for us to ask, "where's God?" especially in the midst of unending pain.

I remember being 16 years old, and my uncle had lost his job. And then a couple of short months later, while he still was looking for work, my parents picked me up and they said, "Greg, we have to go straight to the hospital." Because my cousin had been in school that day and had fallen and had hurt his hip. And as they were looking at things, they realized that he had a degenerative bone disease in his hip. They told him that they weren't even sure yet if he could ever walk again. But for sure, football, baseball was over.

This 13-year-old's life just was tragically altered in his mind. His dreams, his hopes, his aspirations were put to an end. And I remember being in the hospital room and looking at my uncle sitting on the bed and him just saying, "I don't understand the purpose of all this. It just keeps coming." Job loss and now loss of my child and medical bills. "What's the point?" And that's so hard. I think we can all empathize and understand what it's like when pain happens and we don't know where the end is in sight. We don't understand what's happening, and we ask ourselves then the question, where's God?

Nebraskans understand this as well. In the 1930s, with the Dust Bowl, as all of a sudden the dust rises and lives are turned upside down — homes are lost, lives are lost, lifestyles are lost, families are lost, neighbors are lost. Things happen. And there was no end in sight in the 1930s with the Dust Bowl.

As a matter of fact, you can just imagine what it's like to see all the dust cover everything: all of the things that you hold near and dear, your home, your crops, everything. It's dirty, and you and I know what it's like to have the dirt just continually around us and on us. You can taste it if you think about the Dust Bowl. You can taste the grit as you walk outside or as everything on your house is just filled with it. And there's no end in sight.

But we're reminded from our God that pain isn't the end of our story. Our God is a God who always has purpose beginning to rise. Even though the storm may hit the barn, it's not going to shake the foundation that we have in faith.

For you and for me, we know that in the midst of our pain, God's not absent. God's not gone. God is at work. And today I want us to be reminded that when we're asking the question, "where's God?" even when we can't see it, He's at work. He's at work beneath the pain, beneath the storm, beneath all the things that we see, He's at work.

I think sometimes in the middle of our hurts and our heartaches and the major pain that we have, we feel like Job. As Christians, we come and say, "I feel like, I feel like this is my Job moment when I have my pain." And we hear and we think of the words that we've heard from Job, Job chapter 3, verses 11 and 26. It says, "Why didn't I perish at birth?" We have this moment where we get so down on ourselves: "Why didn't I perish right at birth? I have no peace. I have no quietness. I have no rest. I only have turmoil."

We find ourselves in the middle of that and say, "This is my Job moment." It gives us a little bit of comfort because we know the end of that story. But I want to challenge us today, because I think we look at the end of the story in our context of what we know. We're a bunch of people today in our culture that live in a culture of quick fix, quick happenings, quick things.

As a matter of fact, this just got proved: did you know that in 1923, the average length of a family dinner in America was 90 minutes? Wow. You want to know the average length of a dinner in 2023? 12 minutes.

So when our spouses or husbands or whoever cooks the dinners say, "I worked on this for two hours and you ate it in 12 minutes," they have a right to complain.

But I think what happens in our Job lifestyles: we go, "Yes, I'm in pain, why was I born? This is so bad. Oh yeah." Job was restored and redeemed and everything worked out in the end. We get through our painful moment of a week or two weeks, and we say, "When's my Job restoration? When is everything going to be restored? When am I going to be brought back to fullness?"

Do you know how long Job was in his pain and suffering? The scriptures are not clear. In Job chapter 7, there's an allusion to months.

The best route for us to understand and know how long it could have been is to look at Jewish tradition and history. In the Jewish tradition, they teach that Job suffered for nine months — nine long months.

You see, what happens is that we're reminded that God is at work even when we can't see it. Even when it feels unending, even when we wake up and go, "It's still the same. The pain is still here."

That's why we look and know that our farmers, when they're trying to go deeper into the ground, they're digging and it's hard and they're upturning the soil and doing that. Then they're planting so that the roots can get deeper and it can build a better plant over time.

In the midst of our pain while God's working, He's digging through our hearts and making our faith stronger. He's making our trust stronger, and He's making our hope stronger. God's at work in your pain.

Hard ground gets to deep roots, but we get it: life doesn't get easier. It just gets real. And God meets us in the mess.

Life doesn't get easier. It just gets real.

I have to be honest with you and share something that happens in my head all the time, constantly. It's these verses and these truths that I look at and I go, "Oh really?" because I am a person who's always looking to say, "It's got to get easier. As I get going, it's got to get easier."

I remember as an elementary school kid thinking about the next transition, the next phase, and thinking, "Okay, here comes high school. It's going to be great. It's going to get easy. It's going to be a blast. I'm going to have all these sports and all these new friends and all these things and all these girls and all this stuff. It's going to be so easy. I'm going to love it. I'll have independence and freedom, and I'm not going to have any more of the teachers that I've had all my life. It's going to be easy."

And I remember sitting in high school at some point and just going, "Oh, this is so hard." It's not simple. There's emotional turmoil. The homework's harder. The life routine is more difficult. I don't seem to have more freedom. I seem to have less freedom.

Now, looking back as a 47-year-old, I realize my frontal lobe wasn't even nearly grown. I thought I was independent, and I wasn't.

I remember as I was ending high school thinking, "Yes, here we go. It's going to be college. College is going to be awesome. I'm going to live on my own, and I don't have to eat anymore the Grape Nuts and Total and Raisin Bran — the disgusting cereals that my mom and dad buy because they say it's healthy. I'm going for the Fruit Loops and Lucky Charms. I'm going to get all the sugar cereals, and if I want ice cream at 8 a.m., I'm having ice cream because I'm in college. It's going to be simple and easy."

And it wasn't.

I had no idea what it meant to be poor. It was hard. Then, "go to class," like a 7 a.m. class? What? How do I go to class at 7 a.m. when I've been out the night before till 2 a.m.? And then what are these classes that look great? "Oh, it's once a week, Monday night, 6 to 9 p.m." What? It's miserable. It's hard.

And I thought, "Once I'm done with college, then I'll get a job that I love and actually make money. The decimal point will have four things in front of it instead of only one or two, and it's going to be awesome."

And it was like, this is hard.

Then you think, "You're going to get married, and marriage is going to be easy." I know, I know, I know. Then you think, "I'll have kids."

No. I don't know about you, but I had my kids and I was like, "Oh my gosh, this is so difficult. Are they living? Have I hurt them? What can I do?" Just get them to be toddlers. Then they're toddlers and it's

like, "Oh my gosh, all these dangerous corners and these things under my sink and everything that's there."

Then you're like, "Just go to school so you can be there all day and I can rest."

No, there's even more.

Then you're thinking, "Okay, just get to be a teenager." Then they drive, and you're like, "Whoa, don't be driving." Then they're out.

Now, I'm in my mid-forties. I was told this weekend, I'm in my mid-forties at 47. And I thought, this is when we should have financial freedom. This is when everything should be easy. Like all the stuff we've been doing should just now be rolling. But it's really hard.

I remember meeting with a woman who is 98 years old in Michigan. Her name is Dolly. I said, "Dolly, you're 98. I don't even pretend I'll make it to that age because I love hamburgers and hot dogs, and I don't like running nearly as much as that. So I know I'm not getting there."

I asked her, "Can you tell me what you would say to me as someone who's 98?"

She said, "Oh, Greg, I tell you this: it's just hard. Every day I wake up and there's a new pain or a new hurt or the same pain that I was hoping when I slept, it would go away. I can't just do anything quickly. I live in this. I can't say, 'Oh, I want milk and go get milk.' Everything's hard. Here's what I know: you can't be weak and be 98. You have to be strong."

I said, "Well, I am not that strong. It's hard."

I think we get caught. My mind gets caught in this trap of the thought that life should just get easier as we walk with Jesus.

The reality is, Jesus told us quite the opposite in John 16:33, "In this world, you will have trouble."

If you're sitting here today and you're like, "This is one bummer of a message. We just had Easter, and now this," well, you're mad at Jesus, not me.

We're going to have trouble, but take heart.

Why do we take heart? Because in the midst of our pain, in the midst of the trouble of this world, where's God? He's with us. And what's God doing? He's working. God's at work in the midst of all of it.

I think about Paul in 2 Corinthians 12, when Paul is dealing with what he calls a "thorn in the flesh." He says, "I asked God three times to take this away from me."

I wonder, did Paul have the same thoughts I do — bargaining with God? Like, "God, don't you know how much greater I can do for you if I don't have this or do have whatever I'm asking for?"

Did Paul say, "Father, Lord, do you see how many people I can share the gospel with? I'm just killing it in the Gentile world. Every city I go to, there's a storm of people who want to believe and people are chasing me out. If you take this thorn in my flesh..."

We don't know what the thorn is. Many speculate it was about his eyesight because he writes about how difficult it was for him to see. Some have speculated it was his feet; others have wild speculations. We don't know.

But we know it was enough that he said, "Please take this away" three times.

He finally realized he was going to have it; this was going to be his thorn. He calls it a torment of Satan.

Then he finishes with this: "But I know your grace is sufficient for me."

Even in the midst of all this pain, God, you're working and your grace is sufficient for me. Your grace is sufficient for me.

Oh my.

In the midst of the dust storm and the Dust Bowl, it wasn't just about the dust. It was about the discouragement.

In the 1930s, the people living in the Dust Bowl felt their lives ruined: their livestock killed, their farms and futures destroyed.

Not only their farms and futures, but even their community, neighbors, and friends who left and said, "This is out. We're done."

By the way, this is my family. My grandmother grew up somewhere in North Platte in the 1930s, and her family moved west due to the Dust Bowl.

Those who said, "We can't do this, we're gone." But those who stayed, those who continued to plant, hope, support, encourage one another, and stayed in community together, they became the backbone of the heartland. They became the backbone of what we know as Nebraska.

I got to wonder, is this what they were saying when deciding what slogan to choose for Nebraska? They came up with "It's not for everybody."

If you can't be strong, if you can't survive a Dust Bowl, you're going to get out. But those who are strong will stay. It's the Nebraska way.

You think about that pain and heartache and know that God's still working. God's still working.

Have you prayed for rain and the drought continued?

Have you sat on the edge of the bed of a loved one who's going through pain, whether cancer or otherwise, like my uncle Ron seeing his son and feeling totally helpless?

It's a reminder to us that just because life feels barren, it doesn't mean God has abandoned us.

It's our Paul moment.

It's our time, like Paul, when we say, "His grace is sufficient for me."

Even when your field looks empty, God's grace is sufficient for me.

Even when the field looks empty, God's not done working in the midst of your pain and heartache.

His promise is his presence, not that He'll leave you.

From hail to harvest, God is always working.

We see this in scriptures like Isaiah 43: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you."

Emmanuel.

"When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned."

God is with you. He's there in the valley. He is strengthening you. Your faith is growing, your trust is growing, and your hope is assured.

He's there.

But what about when God doesn't move the storm?

Sometimes God doesn't stop the pain, but He always brings purpose through it.

I was reading about a woman in Kearney, Nebraska, whose two-year-old son was diagnosed with leukemia. She asked, "Where's God?" She asked, "Why?" She lamented.

Two years later, still dealing with this with her child, she said, "The pain has never left me, but neither has my God."

God is still with her.

She saw it even when she couldn't see it. She trusted it even when she couldn't see it. She held hope because she knows who God is.

In the 1930s Dust Storm, they called it the Black Blizzard because the dust would come and you couldn't see in front of you or around you. It was black even though the sun was shining beyond it, but they couldn't see it.

They couldn't see the future.

They couldn't see how they would get out of this.

They couldn't see anything better.

They couldn't see what tomorrow would bring.

But they held on.

They held on with faith.

They held on with trust and hope.

They continued doing what they knew they needed to do.

They continued to plant.

They continued to work.

They continued to be.

They took their small kernels of corn, dug down, and planted. Then they pressed and watered and trusted and hoped.

We continue to live in faith, trust, and hope, knowing that even if we can't see it, God is working.

We trust the very word of God from Romans 5:3-4:

"Suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, and character produces hope."

Suffering produces perseverance, that when pressure gets hard, it actually makes something happen and produces something out of us.

The seeds and kernels of faith, trust, and hope begin to sprout.

It produces character.

Small steps of obedience reveal our character.

Adversity reveals character.

And character then brings about our hope — to know that God is working even in the midst of suffering.

He's at work.

He's still at work for you and me.

Even though we can't see, we know there's a day the storm goes away.

There is sun after the storm.

Even in drought, His promise holds true — He's at work.

In the 1930s Dust Bowl, they waited for the storms to go and the sun to come through.

Those who remained stayed faithful to their communities, families, and livelihoods.

They got through.

Their crops began to sprout.

Their livelihoods began to be restored.

Their communities gathered around one another.

They saw the promise of God hold true — that He cared for them.

God is still at work even in seasons of suffering and silence.

God is still at work.

He's working in your life.

He's working even when you don't see it, because it's His promise.

We hold on to that because we know your story doesn't end in despair.

It ends in His glory.

God has overcome all the things of this world.

His glory is yours.

His provision is yours.

His protection is yours.

He's the God who only wants good for you, even when we can't see it.

So yes, even in drought, remember this:

His promise holds true.

There will be a day when you'll see the harvest of the seed and the production of suffering, perseverance, character, and hope.

You'll see the work of God in the harvest.

You'll see that He never left you and never stopped working within you.

I want to wrap up with this from Deuteronomy 6:6-7, talking about the commandments of God, which are the work of God within us.

I want to shape it as well.

We do a great job sharing with our family and kids about all the times we see God doing great things in our lives.

We share the blessings and good things God has done.

Our house is well, our lives are well, all these things are good.

But I wonder what happens if moms and dads start sharing with our kids how we're trusting God in our most painful moments and how we hold faith even when we don't see Him working.

If we tell our children that no matter how rough it is or gets, we will hold on to our faith, trust, and hope.

We know God is working even amidst the mess and the dust, and we gather with community.

When we pass these realities on, we build kids up to walk through their own valleys.

It's easy to talk about the good things God has done in the past and the good things we want Him to do in the future.

But when we talk about where we fully rely on Him and say it's hard, it's a storm, we don't know how to get out except that He's working, even when we can't see, and we trust our faith, trust, and hope will grow — that builds strength.

When we pass that onto children, they carry it through their own storms.

So I invite moms and dads, no matter how old your kids are, impress on them how God walked with you through your storms.

As you leave today at all campuses, there are kernels of corn.

I invite you to take one.

Tape it in your Bible, tape it on your steering wheel, put it in your cup holder — wherever — and use it to remind yourself that even in the dust, God is at work.

Even in the dust, God is at work today, tomorrow, and forever.

Watch what He does and what He grows out of it.

I invite all campuses to stand as we pray.

Let me pray over all of you.

Heavenly Father, we thank You that You're at work even in the midst of the dust.

You are the God whose promise of presence is with us.

You are the God who is here today, tomorrow, and forever, and will never leave us.

You are the God who is at work amidst the dirt and dust that we can't even see — but we know it's going to pop through.

When it does, we'll see a great harvest.

Lord God, let us see those moments.

Help us identify with Job in his patience, waiting, and trust.

Help us identify with Paul to know Your grace is sufficient for us.

Help us identify with one another in community — that we are together and You are at work in all our storms.

Even in the dust, God is at work today, tomorrow, and forever.

All campuses, say, Amen.