

# Praying with the Book of Job



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Suffering is a word that frightens us because it means either that we are stuck in a shallow place and reduced in our self worth, or that we are alone and isolated. We feel profoundly disoriented and vulnerable. We are caught in a cycle of despair, hopelessness, and fear. We cry in our pain. We plead with God in anger and out of self pity demanding an answer to: “why me?” Filled with feelings of envy we ask: “Why is this happening to me?” And, silently, filled with vengeance, we complain that “it” should be happening to someone else, not to me.

However, in truth, we suspect that suffering is redemptive. We don’t know how it is redemptive but we want to believe what Mother Teresa meant when she said that “suffering is a sign we have come so close to Jesus that he can kiss us; and we are so close to Jesus that we can feel him embrace us with physical love.”

The dilemma that the Book of Job presents to us involves our inability to reconcile suffering, pain, and evil with a God who is expected to be all-loving (benevolent) yet all-powerful (omnipotent).

There are no easy answers. However, one way to a solution is to see God as limited and malevolent. This conclusion presumes that a benevolent and an omnipotent God is incompatible with the existence of suffering, pain, and evil. So, it’s easier to assume that God is either incapable and unwilling to deal with human suffering and pain; or is indifferent to the existence of evil.

How can any of these possibilities be true? One way, on a religious and theological level, involves accepting the transcendence and inscrutability of God. God exists so far above us that it is impossible for us to understand his ways and his purposes. God seems to say you are a creature, a created thing, and cannot fathom the ways of the creator, the uncreated force of things. [JOB 38:1-11 and Isaiah 55:8-9].

Another way, on a philosophical level, involves acknowledging that all things work toward the goodness of the totality of all things; it is a recognition of the goodness of the wholeness of things. Or it involves acknowledging that a perfect world is impossible. Or that suffering, pain, and evil are necessary by products of human nature. Or that suffering, pain, and evil are a privation of goodness. Or that suffering, pain, and evil are a healing spiritual therapy. Or that suffering, pain, and evil result from our free will decisions. Or that suffering, pain and evil are irrational states of existence which Good will not remove, so we must work defiantly in the social order to eliminate them.

But, laying aside the theological and philosophical answers, we are left with the overwhelming side effects of suffering, pain and evil. We are tempted to believe Freud that “Often enough the violent, cunning or ruthless person seizes the envied good things of the world and the pious person goes away empty.” A prisoner on death row in the mid West, can win millions of dollars on a single lottery ticket; but the righteous go home with empty pockets.

# A Reflection

The Book of JOB is related to the discussion of the existence of God and the reality of suffering, pain, and evil. Victor Hugo, Alfred Tennyson, and Daniel Webster assessed the Book as a masterpiece of literature; if we needed to decide which book to save in a catastrophe, it would be JOB because we have an intuition the book contains the answer to the dilemma of human suffering.

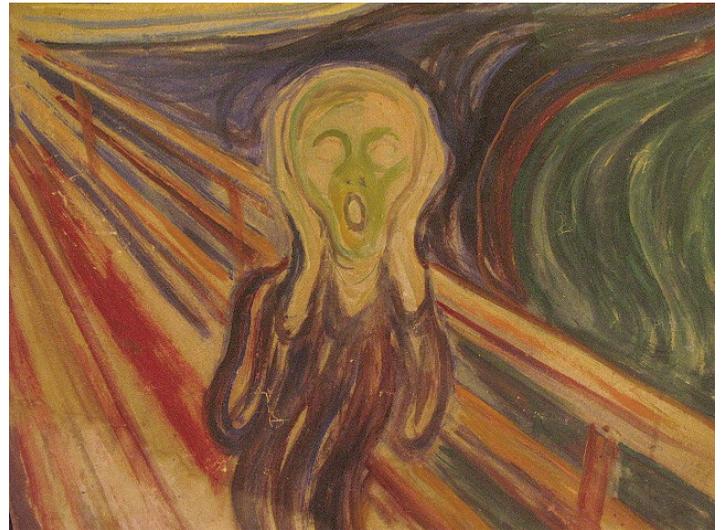
Most of us discuss JOB through the question: “why do the righteous suffer.” However, this is not the primary question in the Book. The real question is found in Job 1:9-11: God Asks: “Does Job fear God for nothing?” Satan, the Adversary, replies: “Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he possesses? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But stretch out your hand and strike everything he owns, and he will surely curse you to your face.”

The question confronting Job and which we all must face is a truly profound one. “Why do we serve God?” Is it for the good stuff we get from him, or because we’re afraid of getting the bad stuff? Or do we serve God simply because we love him? These are the real JOB questions which contain the underlying answers to the dilemma of suffering.

Job struggled to know why he suffered and his faith wavered. From JOB Chapters 2 through 37, Job’s friends try to explain the reasons for his suffering. One of them, Elihu, summarizes that Job isn’t necessarily a sinner, but that his misfortunes are a part of a cycle of divine power that cannot be questioned or understood. “It just is what it is.” Job, in turn, has responded to each of them, declaring his innocence and demanding that God give him answers.

Finally, in Chapter 38, Job gets his wish to confront God face to face for answers. God does not mention the bargain made with Satan. Out of a violent storm, God speaks to Job, but God’s message does not satisfy Job. Instead of answering Job’s questions about whether his suffering is justified, God challenges Job.

God asks Job more than 70 questions dealing with the creation and control of the natural world, none of which Job can possibly answer because they have nothing to do with his suffering pain and evil. In chapter 38 verses 4-7, God asks Job, “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?” In verses 8-11, God asks Job “who was it that placed boundaries around the seas and controls where they are allowed to go?”



If Job wants to question God’s dealings with human beings, then Job needs to prove that he has the knowledge and wisdom that God possesses. If he can’t even understand how the inanimate objects of the natural world were created or how they are controlled by God, then, how can Job understand God’s treatment of mankind?

After suffering the destruction of his property and children, Job suffers physically not because he has violated some holy ordinance, but because God gave the Adversary control over Job. After the Adversary claims that people will give all their possessions “to save their lives,” he continues: “but stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and flesh, and he will curse you to your face.” God, then, issues a capricious challenge to the Adversary, and in an apparently malicious manner the Lord gave the Adversary control over Job, saying “very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.”

# Praying with the Book of Job

Because we ignore the events in Chapters 1-2, we are more likely to read the Book as a theological treatise on human suffering, focusing especially on the suffering of the innocent: like bridges collapsing, earthquakes, viral epidemics, political elections, and other inexplicable miseries which have been ladled onto humanity's plates.

But are we ready to read the textual answer; the explanation? The God who appears at the end of the story supplies not an answer, but a swagger. He thumps his divine chest, demanding to know who this character Job thinks he is anyway. Teachers especially play this game when a student asks an embarrassingly difficult question. One way to handle the question is to raise the voice, act insulted, belittle the student for presumptuously asking a silly question.

But Job had foreseen God's advantage: In chapter 9, Job predicts what would happen if he challenged God to a face to face encounter. "If I summoned him...I do not believe that he would listen to my voice," says Job. "Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn me...he destroys both the blameless and the wicked." Job suspects he will be muscled by the divine power into self-condemnation. Job has experienced a profound epiphany: God's issues are not his issues about suffering, pain, and evil.

In chapter 42, Job, after having been questioned and placed in the cosmic design of things by God, instead of demanding more answers from God, instead of questioning God further, Job answers the only way a man can who has seen the living God face to face; he answers with awe and repentance. Job has resigned himself to being dust and ashes in the face of the cosmic grandeur revealed to him. God, then, reverses his misfortunes and smiles on Job to the end of his life.

So how did God answer Job's questions about the justice of his suffering? God showed Job the transcendent, divine essence. Once he confronted God's essence, Job's questions vanished because he realized that his doubts about God's justice, knowledge, wisdom, and goodness are meaningless. Can

Job stand in judgment over God, the Creator, the sovereign ruler of the universe? Job understands that his questions about his innocence, his suffering, pain, and evil have disappeared because of his inability to demand that God justify the divine transcendent ways to finite man.

Thomas Aquinas posited that we can't know who God is because we don't know what God is; we can know only what God is not. Aquinas formulated, in Part I of the *Summa Theologiae*, eight "Divine Attributes" to explain the divine essence: omnipotence, simplicity, perfection, goodness, infinity, omnipresence, immutability, oneness.

If we want to avoid being consumed with self pity and/or cynicism, what shall we do about the reality of suffering, pain, and evil? The Book of JOB may be useful for finding tranquility in prayer and meditation:

- a. To demonstrate that God is worthy of love apart from the blessings he provides.
- b. To explain that God may allow suffering as a means to purify and to strengthen a person in godliness and goodness.
- c. To emphasize that man is unable to see/view life from God's vast perspective.
- d. To explore the justice of God who treats the righteous with suffering.
- e. To reveal to the evil Adversary/Satan that God's practice of blessing the righteous is not a hindrance to the development of true righteousness.
- f. To address mankind's wrestling with afflictions which defies human explanation and/or comprehension. So, it is OK to complain, cry, stamp our feet, make accusations to God, even to want to inflict pain on God as a catharsis for our own pain.

# A Reflection

- g. To show us that our own lives are deeply imperiled if a man, like Job, of such impeccable reputation can suffer devastating misfortune, the question, then is how can I presume to escape?
- h. To register for us the failure and inability of human wisdom to penetrate into the mystery of human suffering. So, Job can finally say: “I...repent in dust and ashes.”
- i. To remind us that our covenant with God is inviolable and irrevocable: the issue of unmerited suffering aside, if we are guilty of sin and deserve to be punished, God will always return his portion of blessings when we return our portion of *metanoia*.
- j. To be a didactic lesson of edification as an example of patience; a book of consolations for all who suffer; an instruction to learn that misfortune is not a sign of God’s hatred for us, but is often a proof of special divine love. There is a reward for fidelity to God during the time of suffering.

The underlying questions are difficult because the underlying answers are elusive. A first reading of the Book of Job is the beginning of a journey that helps us to find God through prayer, almsgiving, and fasting because these lead us to die to a false

self. The self which makes us refuse to see the essence of God because we see ourselves as self sufficient. So, we need to die to self, to be reborn, to find God as our true center of worship, in all things, in all desires; to find God as the source of our light in the darkness, and to realize our need of God as a child realizes the need of a parent. We find God by learning to recognize sin and the need for repentance; the need to be meek and humble of heart. We find God in our faith.

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