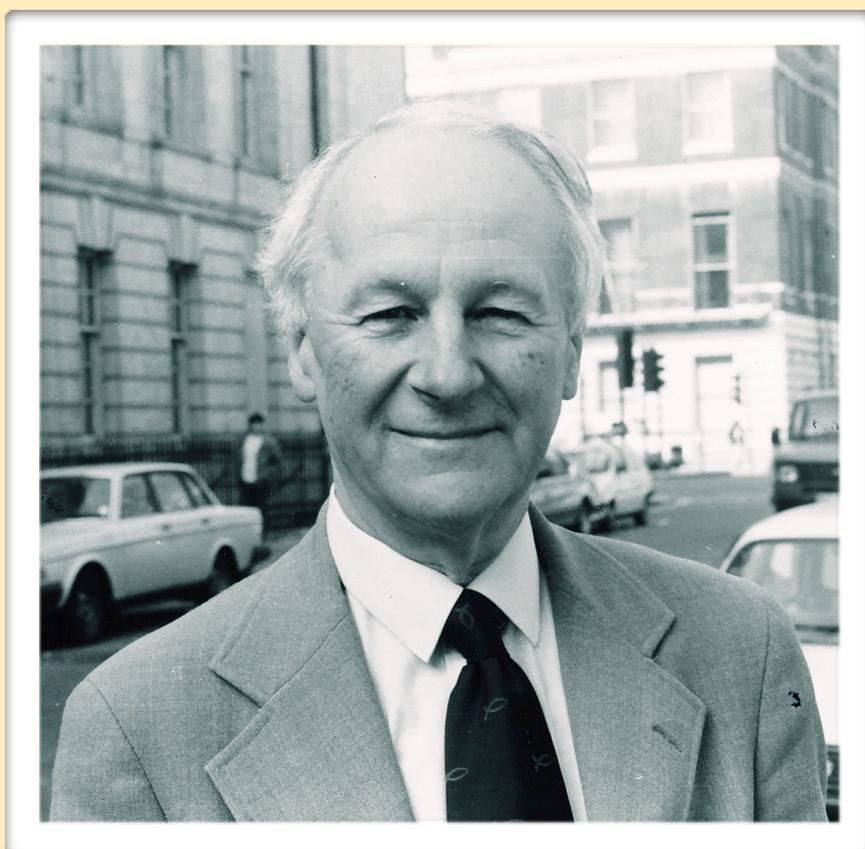


# WHY DO THE INNOCENT SUFFER?

*The Message of the Book of Job*

by

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# WHY DO THE INNOCENT SUFFER?<sup>1</sup>

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## The Message of the Book of Job

THERE is no problem in the whole realm of human experience so bewildering as the problem of undeserved suffering. Bereavement, sickness or misfortune suddenly engulfs us. Our mind is baffled and our heart bowed with grief. We can find no explanation and little comfort. The problem is aggravated by the apparent indifference of God. The heavens seem silent, even sullen. We cry out in despair with the psalmist

*Why, Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?  
(Psalm 10:1)*

Many of the Biblical writers are aware of the problem and there are several passages in the Bible in which the subject is considered. But there is one book which is devoted extensively to this greatest of all human problems, and that is the Book of Job, which Tennyson described as “the greatest poem of ancient or modern times”. We shall, however, study it not for its literary beauty but for its moral and spiritual message, and we shall find, as Martin Luther said, that it is “magnificent and sublime as no other book of Scripture”.

Let me remind you of the situation. Job, wealthy and upright, is overtaken by a series of appalling calamities. First, by tribal invasion and stroke of lightning, he loses all his livestock, his oxen and asses, his sheep and camels. Next, his seven sons and three daughters are killed in one moment by a devastating tornado. Finally, he himself is smitten from head to foot with boils. Professor Arthur Rendle Short thought that Job's sickness was smallpox.

Be that as it may, he was so disfigured that his friends hardly recognised him, and his skin infection itched so fiercely that he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself. He then sat, stricken and forsaken among the ashes. So far, the story has occupied two chapters in the book. The remaining forty chapters are devoted to a debate on the meaning of such suffering, and in particular on the different attitudes which may be adopted towards it. Various attitudes are proposed by Job, by his three comforters, by Elihu and finally by God Himself.

### 1. The Attitude Adopted By Job Is SELF-PITY

*May the day of my birth perish. (Job 3:5)*

He was absorbed with himself and his sickness. At first, it is true, he met his misfortunes with remarkable courage and patience. Even when his wife urged him to curse God and die, he paid no heed. But, as the first week wore on and his comforters sat round him in silence, he could at last bear it no longer. He lost control of himself. His tottering faith collapsed in ruins, and he cursed the day of his birth.

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<sup>2</sup> Biblical quotations were originally given in the RSV, but are here provided in the TNIV.

May the day of my birth perish, and the night that said, 'A boy is conceived!' (3:3)

This note of complaint and despair continues in nearly every answer which Job gives to the advice and so-called comfort of his friends. Sometimes, he is wildly defiant. He accuses God of cruelty and injustice. He shakes his fist in the face of the Almighty. He describes God as

- ▶ stalking him like a lion (10:16)
- ▶ targeting like an archer (16:12-13) *and*
- ▶ pursuing him as the wind chases dried leaves and chaff (13:25).

At other times he is argumentative. He wants to plead his innocence before the bar of God.

If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. (23: 3-4).

In the end, he lapses into plain self-pity. He wistfully remembers his former prosperity (chapter 29) and contrasts with it tearfully his present distress (chapter 30, especially verses 16-23). He also cries:

Have pity on me, my friends, have pity, for the hand of God has struck me. (19:21)

Such is the attitude of a stricken sufferer who cannot see beyond his own sufferings. Many folk since Job, afflicted with his calamities, have uttered his curses. Tragedy makes them embittered, morose, hard, and full of self-pity. We do not sit in judgment on them, for we know the frailty of our own nature. But we recognise that self-pity is the worst possible reaction to suffering. It is dishonouring to God; it is unbecoming in a rational human being; and in the case of sickness it is a positive hindrance to the patient's recovery.

## 2. The Attitude Proposed By Job's Three Comforters Is SELF-ACCUSATION

*I still dread all my sufferings, for I know you will not hold me innocent. (Job 9:28)*

Job's three comforters ask him to look not at himself and his sickness but at himself and his sin. Their philosophy is brutally cold and utterly conventional. To them sickness is always due to personal sin. They find in sin and suffering the inevitability of cause and effect. They therefore accuse Job vehemently of secret sin and urge him to repent.

Thus, Eliphaz the Temanite says:

Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plough evil and those who sow trouble reap it. (4:7-8)

Bildad the Shuhite is more outspoken but equally bigoted. Job's children, he says, have been punished for their sins (8:4), and indeed all sinners will perish as surely as the reeds and rushes wither where there is no water (8:11-13).

Zophar the Naamathite is the most dogmatic and the least sympathetic of the three. In his opinion, Job's guilt deserves more punishment than he has received, not less! (11:6).

When each of these three vaunted comforters has had his say and Job has replied, a second round of speeches begins, and then a third round, in which the same dreary dogma is propounded. Much is beautiful in their expression, but their speeches are full of fatuous platitudes and highly questionable opinions, which are introduced in the Word of God in order to be contradicted, not believed.

- ▶ “All their days the wicked suffer torment,” says Eliphaz. (15:20)
- ▶ “The lamp of a wicked man is snuffed out,” adds Bildad. (18:5)
- ▶ “The mirth of the wicked is brief,” concludes Zophar. (20:5)

But they are wrong! This interpretation just will not do—at least not as a general and inviolable principle. It is sometimes true that sin brings suffering (though all suffering is certainly not due to personal sin). It is also true that much suffering is due to the sins of others. It is undoubtedly true that suffering is often Satanic in its origin (it was so in Job's case, as is clear from the first two chapters). But the prologue to the book also reveals clearly that Job's sufferings are a token not of God's judgment on him for his sins but of God's confidence in him for his integrity! This is the exact opposite of the thesis of his comforters. There is no Biblical justification whatever for the theory that all suffering is a punishment for sin.

A deadlock has been reached. Job and his three comforters are now silent, having utterly failed to find an explanation of the mystery of the meaning of suffering.

There now enters at chapter 32 a new figure, who occupies the stage for six chapters. He is a younger man. His name is Elihu. He is diffident, because of his age, to speak, but he is exasperated by the self-righteousness and self-pity of Job, and by the folly of his three comforters. He offers a third explanation.

### 3. The Attitude Recommended By Elihu Is SELF-DISCIPLINE

*He makes them listen to correction. (Job 36:10)*

Like the others, he is ignorant of the prologue to the book in which a sovereign God gives a limited permission to Satan to afflict Job, but it is still his conviction that God has a disciplinary purpose in suffering. He speaks of God as a teacher not as a judge. He urges Job to look not at his present physical sufferings, but at the future moral and spiritual benefits which might be derived from his sufferings. His thesis is this.

God desires to turn men aside from evil and to cut off their pride (33:17). He has many ways of accomplishing this, but He finds man dull of hearing and dim of understanding (33:14). So He sometimes permit suffering in order to fulfil His disciplinary purpose.

*But if people are bound in chains, held fast by cords of affliction, he tells them what they have done - that they have sinned arrogantly. He makes them listen to correction and commands them to repent of their evil. (36:8-10).*

Again:

*But those who suffer he delivers in their suffering; he speaks to them in their affliction. (36:15)*

*God is exalted in His power. Who is a teacher like Him? (36:22)*

There is undoubtedly much in Scripture and in experience to support this view. It is not the only answer. It is not the ultimate answer. But it is an answer. The heavenly Father sometimes wields a chastening rod because

*... the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his child. (Hebrews 12:6)*

The divine gardener uses a pruning knife in order that we may bring forth more fruit (John 15:2). The refiner of souls sometimes casts us into the crucible in order that our faith, thus tested and purified, may redound to His praise and honour (1 Peter 1:7).

Do not the buds of Christlikeness break into their finest blossom during or after a period of trial? Do not the flowers of faith and fortitude grow best in a sickroom? Does not the Lord Jesus

become more real and precious when we lie on our back and are forced to look up into His face? Does not our moral and spiritual perspective become adjusted when we are snatched from the fevered rush of life and are transferred into the seclusion and the tranquillity of illness? Do we not come to value our heavenly treasure more highly when we have lost our earthly health or possessions, relatives or friends? God's purpose is to transform us into the beautiful image of His Son Jesus, and one of His methods is to allow us to suffer. Elihu has a real contribution to make in this debate. But his is not the last word.

Job and his four friends are now silent, and at last God Himself speaks.

#### 4. The Attitude Demanded By God Is SELF-SURRENDER

*Now my eyes have seen you therefore I despise myself and repent. (Job 42:5-6)*

God answers Job out of the whirlwind (chapter 38). He hurls at him a rapid series of bewildering questions.

Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge? (38:2)  
Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? (38:4) Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been shown to you? (38:16-17) Do you know the laws of the heavens? (38:33) Can you raise your voice to the clouds and cover yourself with a flood of water? (38:34) Do you hunt the prey for the lioness? (38:39) Who provides food for the raven (38:41)

Who let the wild donkey go free? (39:5) Will the wild ox consent to serve you? (39:9) Do you give the horse its strength? (39:19) Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom? (39:26) Does the eagle soar at your command? (39:27)

For two long chapters God rains upon Job this battery of questions, setting forth His power, His wisdom and His loving providence. Job is overwhelmed with confusion. He stammers a few words, and then lays his hand on his mouth and says nothing. So God's questions begin again; and for two more chapters (40 and 41) they continue. Job is asked to consider behemoth and leviathan, the hippopotamus and the crocodile. In two wonderful chapters, these animals are described, in all their strength, resourcefulness and fearlessness. Again, Job is overwhelmed. He says:

*I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. (42:2)*

He is ashamed of his complaints and criticisms. Grievous as his sufferings have been, he recognises that he has no excuse for doubting or accusing God. So he humbles himself.

*My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes. (42:5-6).*

You will observe that God has not answered his questions, He has not solved the problem. He has not unlocked the mystery of suffering. He has simply revealed Himself as a God of power and wisdom and love, and asked for Job's trust. God is concerned rather to arouse our faith than to satisfy our curiosity.

"But," a scientist may reply, "this is intolerable. This is too much. God has given us a brain and means us to use it."

Yes, indeed, but there are limits to the sphere in which the finite mind of man can work. Men may indeed investigate the nature of disease, its causes, incidence, symptoms and cure, but no laboratory will ever witness the discovery of its meaning or its purpose. I would even believe that one of the reasons why God has not revealed this mystery is to keep us proud mortals humble.

Our broad horizons are so narrow to God. Our vast knowledge is so small to Him. Our great brain is so limited in His sight. He says to us as He said to Job:

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Have you entered the storehouses of the snow? Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades? Can you loosen Orion's belt? Do you send the lightning bolts on their way? Do they report to you, 'Here we are'? (38:4, 22, 31, 35).

The only right attitude towards suffering is worship, or humble self-surrender. This is not a grovelling humiliation but a sober humility. This is not to commit intellectual and moral suicide; this is to acknowledge the limits of our finite minds. This is, in a word, to let God be God and to be content ourselves to remain mere men. This is reasonable too when we have had a revelation of God like Job's.

"But," says a critic, "we have not". Wait a moment! We have, you know. We have had a better and a fuller one. We are much more favoured than Job. He only knew the God of nature; we know the God of grace. He only knew the God of the earth and the sky and the sea; we know the God of Jesus Christ. He only knew the God of the crocodile; we know the God of the cross. If it was right and reasonable for Job to worship, it is much more reasonable for us. We have seen the Cross. Heaven is neither silent nor sullen. Heaven has been opened. and Christ has descended, and God has revealed Himself in the Christ of the cross. The cross is the pledge of God's love. The cross supplies us with data from which we may deduce the immense and inextinguishable love of God. If He thus suffered voluntarily, can we not trust Him when we have to suffer involuntarily? He is not a distant, unfeeling deity, coldly indifferent to the woes and the sins of men. He entered into our woes when He was born in a stable. He bore our sins when He died on a cross.

What then is the message of the book of Job? It is this. When faced with calamity or stricken with sickness, the mind must be engrossed not in our sickness (for that is morbid self-pity), nor in our sins (for that is introspective self-accusation), but partly in the moral and spiritual profit to be derived from suffering, which is valuable self-discipline, and best of all in God Himself. This is humble self-surrender to the God of power and wisdom and love, who has been fully and finally revealed in the cross. This is the sober, wise realism of Christian worship.

I would venture to say in conclusion that he can best interpret his own sufferings and the sufferings of others who has witnessed the sufferings of Christ. He can best endure the trials of this world who has been with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, followed Him up the green hill called Calvary, and there learned to trust Him as Saviour and to surrender to Him as Lord.

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