

THE ANSWER TO JOB
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It's amazing how some things stick in your mind. I remember as a summer intern being in a Bible Study led by my supervisor. We were studying the book of James when one of the laypeople suddenly said, "I don't like that. I'm going to cross it out." And he did! Can you do that? Can you just erase the sections of the Scriptures you don't like, any more than you can erase the sections of life which don't appeal to you?

The passage we read today in Job is one of those which we might want to cross out of our Bibles. It's one of those we understand, and we don't like. It's very negative, pessimistic, depressed and depressing. And it hits too close to home.

Job is reflecting upon his own situation in which he has suffered greatly losing property and prosperity, family and personal health. Although Job's losses are greater than most of us have ever or will ever experience, we can all sympathize and empathize with him. We too have experienced such despondency from time to time.

And like Job this despondency has led us to examine the human condition in more general terms. We too have wondered at the apparent meaninglessness and tediousness of life when life has seemed more like slavery than a gift. There are times when life seems, in Job's words, like "months of emptiness" and "nights of misery," when nights are long filled with tossing and turning rather than rest, and days are swift. Job even goes as far as to contemplate whether death might be preferable to life for it would allow one to escape the bonds of slavery and sickness.

The passage we read ends in verse seven with two themes. First, that life is fleeting, transient and unstable, a breath without

substance. Like exhaling, it is quickly over leaving no permanent record. Secondly, that life is so bleak that Job never expects to see any good again. What moments are given by the breath of life are all bad.ⁱ

We don't like to hear this, do we? It is a painful contemplation and an unpleasant reminder of more depressing times in our own lives, or perhaps it is like a caustic rubbed into a present wound.

The suffering and despondency of Job we understand. It rings true even if extreme. But Job confronts us implicitly with what we don't understand, the most perplexing questions of life which surround and emanate from the great mystery of suffering. This is what the story of Job is about. It probes the depths of faith in the face of suffering.

Job implicitly here and explicitly elsewhere asks very difficult but profoundly important questions. Why is there suffering and pain? Why do I suffer? What kind of God allows such pain? Where is God in all this? And pragmatically, and perhaps most importantly, how do I cope with suffering, my own and that of others?

I once proposed at a lectionary bible study that the answer to Job is Christ, the healer we find in the Gospel passage. Perhaps they were just being polite, but it appeared as if everyone agreed with that. But what does it mean, the answer to Job is Christ? Is it just empty jargon feigning to be a response, or does it have meaningful substance?

The one question which Christ does not answer, at least not fully, is the question of 'Why?' Why is there suffering? The book of Job itself spends considerable time wrestling with this question. Each of Job's three friends who come to care for him and to help him put forth the orthodox answer. Suffering is God's punishment for sin. Such thinking is based on our human knowledge of God. If God is holy and just it is unthinkable that the evil should

prosper. The evil must be punished and the good must be rewarded. "Whatever you sow, that also will you reap."ⁱⁱ "If you sin you suffer," they say. "Therefore, if you suffer you must have sinned."ⁱⁱⁱ This is a popular notion. "What have I done to deserve this?" people ask.

Both Job and Jesus reject such a theory. It is one thing to recognize that sin brings its own consequences. It is quite another then to say that all suffering is a punishment for sin. Job opposed such thinking by recognizing that it doesn't accord with reality. First of all, although Job admits his sins,^{iv} they aren't great enough to account for such great suffering. Secondly, it is quite obvious that some evil people prosper quite well.^v And thirdly, he recognized that such a conception of religion leads ultimately to hypocrisy, doing the right thing for the wrong reason, being righteous for personal profit. Job, however, is left then with no explanation of why he suffers so. He does the only thing left to do. He turns to God.^{vi}

Jesus also rejects the orthodox position that suffering is punishment for sin because it doesn't accord with God. In John 9 when confronted with a man born blind and asked, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" Jesus responded that it was neither. Rather it was so that the works of God might be made manifest.^{vii}

Does this mean that the answer to Job's `Why?' is that God brings about suffering, not as punishment, but as a prideful way to manifest God's glory? I think not.

Bruce McLeod in a sermon reminds us about Alec Campbell, a blind pianist and musical humourist. Alec Campbell was a favourite guest on Sunday evening musical programmes. One thing he did was to ask people to call out six or seven notes at random. Then, to the amazement of thousands, he would proceed to turn those notes into a piece of music. No matter how odd their progression one to the other he would build harmonies between them.

Alec Campbell did not pick the notes; he only created the harmony. He didn't have to do it this way. People thrilled just to hear him play. But it was his special pleasure to give the people their freedom, to interact with them rather than play to them. And he was never defeated. His ability to harmonize the notes was greater than their potential discord.^{viii}

This is what Jesus was getting at, not that God brings about suffering, but uses it. As Paul says, "In all things God works together for good with those who love God."^{ix} There is no promise that the notes will be changed, but that harmony will come through. God is never defeated, never stumped, never stalemated.

This doesn't exactly answer the question, 'Why?' but it does lead us to the answer to the questions, "What kind of God allows this?" and "Where is God in all this?"

Where is God? Look to Christ, who is Emmanuel, God with us. God is with us. And what kind of God do we have? Look to Christ. God as revealed in Christ is a harmonizer bringing harmony out of discord, a healer bringing wholeness, an organizer bringing order out of chaos. Christ is the answer.

I hope this won't be misunderstood. I know it sounds rather blasphemous, but Christ in a sense reveals the `humanity' of God, God's personal nature. This is to say that in the humanity of Christ the divinity of God is revealed. God is seen not as powerful potentate, but as suffering servant; not as distant but as with us; not as impassive, but as active. In Christ we see that God is profoundly involved with us and in our destiny. God is present as love, as caring, as helping, as healing.

Dr. Paul Tournier once remarked that many of his clients would thank him for his patience in listening to them as they poured out their tales of woe. His response was that it wasn't that he was patient; he was interested. God is not just patient with our persistent prayers, but interested in our pain. That interest

alone is comforting and healing.

A distraught parent whose child had just been killed by being dragged by a car once cried, "Where was God?" The minister dared to answer, "God was with her, under the car." We could never dare that answer, except that we know Christ and so we know God. God was with the child, and God is with the parents, even if they aren't aware of God's presence.

And this presence is the beginning of the answer to the question of how we cope with suffering. Christ is the answer. We know that we can "Take it to the Lord in prayer."

This brings us to another of those passages we are tempted to ignore, this time because it seems too minor and meaningless. It concerns the healing of Simon's mother-in-law. Jesus cured her of a fever. Then, Mark says, "She served them." This response is given in contrast to the response of others, especially Simon.

Simon interrupts Jesus at prayer to draw his attention to the clamouring crowds, with their pain and questions, but Simon does nothing about them himself. Simon's mother-in-law responds to the Good News of healing by beginning to serve. It was as if she was "Saved to Serve."

Can we really deduce such a contrast from such a short phrase? Probably not if it was isolated, but Mark in a number of places makes the role of women the model of discipleship.^x You see there is more to being made whole than being healed; there is the call to become healers. The Church is not an ambulance corps, but a firing line. We are saved to serve. The response Jesus is wanting to the Good News of God with us and God caring for us, is our response to take up our cross and to follow him, to harmonize our will with God's will, to be ourselves answers to the questions of Job.

A man was walking along a beach one day when he saw a young woman picking up starfish and flinging them into the sea. Catching up with her he asked what she was doing. She answered

that these starfish were stranded by the outgoing tides and would die if left to dry out in the sun. "But the beach goes on for miles, and there are millions of dying starfish," the man said. "How can your effort make any difference?"

The young woman looked at the starfish in her hand, and then threw it to safety in the waves. "It makes a difference to this one," she said.^{xi}

May we be among those who have been saved to serve, healed to become healers. Christ is the answer to suffering and may Christ work in and through us so that our lives might make a difference to the suffering, questioning Jobs of our world. Amen.

i. See Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year B*, Abingdon Press, 1984, pp. 131-132.

ii. Galatians 6:7.

iii. See Psalm 1: 3-4; 37: 1-3, 9-10, 25, 27-28.

iv. Job 13:26; 14:4.

v. e.g. Job 21: 7-9, 13-16; 23:1-17.

vi. William B. Ward, *Out of the Whirlwind*, John Knox Press, 1958, pp. 40-43.

vii. John 9: 1-7.

viii. Told in Bruce McLeod, "Behind a Frowning Providence," *City Sermons: Preaching From a Downtown Church*, Welch, 1986, pp. 57-58 as well as in "It's The Will of God - Or is It?" reprinted in *The Whole People Of God*.

ix. Romans 8: 28.

x. Mark 12: 41-44; 14: 3-9; 15: 40-41; 16: 1. See Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Interpretation: Mark*, John Knox Press, 1983, pp. 54-55.

xi. Hugh Duncan, "Evangelism," published in an Australian publication called *The Clip Sheet*, ed. by Tony Nancarrow, reprinted in *Jim Taylor's Currents*, Vol. 4, No. 1, December 1987, p. 7.