

What Suffering Tells Us About Ourselves

Pentecostal Evangel, April 25, 1993

Earl Creps, Ph.D.

Director, Doctor of Ministry Program
in Pentecostal Leadership

Assemblies of God Theological Seminary
Springfield, Missouri

ecreps@agseminary.edu
www.agts.edu

Abstract: To some people Christianity seems like an insurance policy, a guarantee that little will go wrong with their lives. If only this were so. Using the book of Job, this article examines the role of suffering in the lives of believers. Pain challenges everything about our faith and our attitudes. Allowed to do its work, however, the discomforts of life can tell us things about ourselves that we could never know otherwise.

It is the most perplexing dilemma of the Christian faith. How can a loving God allow hateful events to befall humanity?

The biblical text most often searched to defend God's reputation is the book of Job. The suffering and triumph of this man are legend even among those who profess no interest in God. Job had everything, lost everything, and got more than everything back.

When reviewing the tortuous process of losing family, property, and health, many are perplexed by the paradox of tragedy striking someone who even God admitted was "blameless and upright" (1:8). Job complained to his friends that God "crushes me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause" (9:17).

In this lament over his condition Job may have thought he was exposing God's cruelty and capriciousness, but he actually revealed the state of his own heart--and ours. Job's story did not resolve the dilemma of evil by explaining God, but by explaining people. Suffering tells us more about the creation than the Creator.

My question, "How could a good God let this happen to me?" tells me four things about myself:

1. I have an inner bill of rights.

Just as the Constitution lists the freedoms guaranteed to all citizens, we have a list of nonnegotiable expectations about our life-styles. Frequently this inner bill of rights is unspoken or even unconscious until it is violated.

Chuck Colson recently reported survey results on what Americans believe to be their inalienable rights. Ninety-six percent of us (including 95 percent of believers) feel that everyone has a right to freedom and prosperity; 63 percent (54 percent of believers) agree that the purpose of life is enjoyment and fulfillment; 87 percent (the same for believers) say that good health is the most important thing in their lives, second only to family.

Job would have made a fine American. These are all the things he lost. And when these losses violated his inner bill of rights, he lashed out, raging that God "laughs at the plight of the innocent" (9:23). He saw himself as not much more than a walking target: "For the arrows of the Almighty are within me; my spirit drinks in their poison" (6:4).

If my inalienable rights can be trampled in this way, why should I serve God at all?

In our affluent culture Christianity can seem to be an insurance policy designed to protect me from threats to my comfort and prosperity. Didn't Jesus die to free me from sin so I can live the American dream unencumbered? If so, any sudden shock to the system makes God seem like a liar or worse.

Jesus explained this tendency to blame our Heavenly Father when He said that a person must choose between serving the Lord and serving money, for he or she will surely "hate the one and love the other" (Matthew 6:24). This verse explains the emotional consequences of buying into the world's values. When crisis comes, we risk hating God because we have loved other things more.

Terrible losses stripped Job of all these other things. But they also stripped away any part of his relationship with God that was based on material blessing. With the wealth, power, and status Job enjoyed prior to his undoing, even Satan could ask, "Does Job serve God for nothing?" (See Job 1:9-11.)

With his blessings gone and his bill of rights in tatters, Job was forced to ground his life in the person of God rather than the fringe benefits of knowing that Person. This transformation took place when the Lord revealed His transcendent greatness to His devastated servant. Job confessed, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (42:3).

When things are going well, an inner bill of rights seems logical and necessary. However, when I am shattered by seemingly random evil, I am forced to decide where my ultimate trust is going to be placed--in the blessings of God or the God of blessings. When I surrender my rights and cling to the Lord alone, the path to restoration begins to unfold.

2. I demand fairness.

Job was a common name among the Semitic peoples of the patriarchal era (2000-1500 BC). Modern scholars tend to define it as meaning "no father." Job may have been an orphan or illegitimate. If so he would have started life in his culture with a severe handicap and yet now possessed a large family and fabulous wealth. He was a true self-made man.

As a believer, Job freely acknowledged, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away" (1:21). However, it would be hard for such a capable man to avoid concluding that his own talents and virtues had not in some small way been responsible for his blessed life. After all, God does reward the righteous, doesn't He?

This tidy mindset collapsed along with his financial empire. Job vented his bitterness by asking God, "Does it seem good to You that You should oppress, that You should despise the work of Your hands?" (10:3). In other words, why did You give me this only to destroy me by taking it away?

Nothing creates this kind of resentment like inequitable treatment at the hands of someone who can do better. The Psalmist assured us that "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether" (Psalm 19:9). But when we hurt through no fault of our own, those words can seem like a cruel hoax luring us into trusting a God who practices injustice, failing to return to us the just deserts of our labors.

The seeming unfairness of Job's predicament illustrates a shocking fact: God blesses righteousness by grace and not by obligation. As Dr. Roy Zuck put it, "Man's worship of God does not stem from a businesslike contract, whereby he earns material rewards from God." If our relationship with the Lord were based on a legalistic quid pro quo, then any difficulty would be grounds for self-condemnation or a breach of contract accusation. But Job had failed to think through the implications of such a demand for justice.

The last thing any of us should want is to be treated fairly by God. *Do you really want the Lord to give you exactly what you deserve?* When Jesus heard that Pilate had murdered some Galileans in Jerusalem, He challenged His followers: "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:2,3).

Thank God that He does not operate under human notions of fairness. As the Psalmist explained: "If you, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" (Psalm 130:3). Job discovered that God's grace means receiving what we need instead of what we deserve. It is a cause for adoration, not accusation.

3. I have tunnel vision.

During his defense before the Lord, Job pointed out that he had been deeply involved in helping the blind, the lame, and the disenfranchised (29:15,16). He had been exposed firsthand to devastating forms of human suffering. Yet none of this seemed to challenge his underlying faith in the Lord's character.

However, when Job's own life lay crushed under the heavy hand of tragedy, he cursed the day he was born (Job 3) and pressed God for answers (Job 10). This is tunnel vision--the ability to ignore the dilemma posed by evil until it has arrived at my doorstep.

For years he had watched the helpless agonize and frequently had stepped in to help. Why was their suffering not a challenge to the Lord's integrity? Was Job feeling that he was more righteous than the widows and orphans?

Tunnel vision means that *your* suffering is a shame, but *my* suffering is a theological crisis. As someone has put it, when my uncle is laid off, it's a slowdown; when my brother is laid off, it's a recession; but when I am laid off, it's a depression.

Unexpected trauma forces me to realize that pain and trial are "common to man" (1 Corinthians 10:13). The comfort God provides will become the healing balm I can apply to someone else's wound. (See 2 Corinthians 1:3,4.) When my perspective broadens to include others on equal terms with myself, I do not need to blame God because I no longer feel so singled out. As the healing process progresses, I increasingly can share the strength the Lord has imparted to me with the next person in line.

Job discovered that the Kingdom is not a painless place. It is a place of restoration through pain. Jesus suffered the ultimate violence to make this possible. He promised: "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

4. I am loved unconditionally.

When I sit in the ash heap of my shattered expectations, I am bereft of answers to my theological questions. Those who try to provide those answers, like Job's counselors, usually do more harm than good. The natural human tendency in this situation is to blame, condemn, and doubt. Faith does not come easily when I am scraping my wounds with a potsherd. Under such pressure Job presumed to debate the very God of the universe.

At the end of the debate, however, the Lord had the last word by revealing himself to Job from the whirlwind. The awestruck reply evinced a profound change in Job's attitude: "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:5,6). The ashes that symbolized Job's helpless affliction would now become the starting point of total restoration.

While his self-righteous friends barely escaped with their lives, poor Job received back from the Lord two times everything he had lost. (See Job 42:10-17.) This took place despite his laments, diatribes, doubts, and fears. The Lord is not put off by our weakness. "For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust" (Psalm 103:14). No one understands our humanity like the One who created us, became one of us, and died for us.

God's love for His servant did not depend on the man's righteousness or his stoicism in the face of excruciating pain. If Job's strident complaints cannot turn aside the love and mercy of God, then nothing can. The Lord's restoring mercy is available to any hurting person who will call upon Him.

If suffering has led you to doubt and condemn God, do not despair. Job's story is that of a person who fell victim to the same pressures and yet never fell out of the palm of God's hand. This tender and unconditional affection was expressed through the prophet Isaiah: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands" (Isaiah 49:15,16).

Having suffered unjustly on our behalf, the Lord Jesus can reach out His nail-scarred hand to the broken person with an empathy available from no other source.

When Job surrendered his limited understanding to embrace his limitless God, the road to restoration lay open. As Dr. Zuck notes, when Job realized that God is not obligated to man, "Job's questions vanished and his resentment left." The Lord was more than ready to express His unconditional love for this man in the form of abundant blessing. When Job surrendered completely, he was left with God alone--and that was all he needed.

*Scripture references are from the New King James Version.