

## **“I’ve got issues: if God is good, why is there so much suffering in the world?”**

By Dr. Mark Smith

January 17, 2010

Job 38: 1-7, 42:1-5; Psalm 73:21-26; Revelation 21:1-5

Probably the most common issue raised by critics of the Christian faith has to do with the relationship between the goodness of God and the tragedy of human suffering:

*“If God is as good as you say, why is there so much suffering in the world?”*

*“If God is love, why does God allow innocent children to die of hunger and disease? If God is good, why does God allow tens of thousands to die as the result of an earthquake? What kind of a God would allow this to happen?”*

Of course, it is not just critics and skeptics who wonder—believers do too, especially as we think about the terrible devastation in Haiti.

Where is God at times like this? Of course, human beings have been asking this question since the dawn of time.

The quintessential book on the problem of God and human suffering in the Bible, and perhaps in all of world literature, is the Book of Job.

When you first meet Job, he has everything you could want – good character, great wealth, a large family. There are ten children, thousands of sheep and camels and oxen. He is the greatest of all the people of the East. And then blow by blow, Job’s life begins to fall apart. A messenger comes to announce that an Arab tribe had come and carried away all his cattle. While the messenger is speaking, another comes to say that a storm had destroyed all sheep and goats. Yet another messenger arrives to report that a tribe of Chaldeans had carried off his camels. Another brings the devastating news that his children, all of whom were gathered together at a banquet, were killed when a storm blew in and collapsed the house. On top of that, Job’s health falls apart; he is afflicted with boils from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. And then there his wife, who rather unsympathetically turns to Job and says, *“Why don’t you curse God and die!”*

Then enters some of Job’s friends who try to comfort him. And at first they do the right thing. Sometimes when a friend is overwhelmed with trouble and suffering, the best thing is to simply take that friend by the hand and sit with them in silence. It’s enough just to be there for them. You don’t have say anything or offer pat answers. Job’s friends sit quietly with Job in sympathy. In fact, they sit with Job for seven days and seven nights and they cried with him. *“No one said a word to him,”* says the author of the Book of Job, *“because they saw how great his suffering was.”*

But the silence is broken by Job himself, who is beside himself in agony and complains bitterly. He never actually curses God or blames God for his predicament – though he comes close. He cries out: *“I wish I had never been born!”* A lot of folks in Haiti can relate to Job right now. How much suffering can anyone endure?

It was the very senselessness of his suffering that causes Job so much anguish. If there seems to be a reason for our suffering, then perhaps we can take it. But what gets to us is that so much suffering is pointless. Job can't figure it out. He is an upright, good man, who trusts God, and yet -such calamity! He simply can't explain his predicament in light of his faith in a good God.

Well then, his friends try to be helpful and in the next 25 chapters or so of the book of Job, his friends discuss with him some possible answers. Of course, it's easy for them to talk – they don't have the boils! But in any case, they offer Job the wisdom of the ages, which boils down to two stock reasons for suffering.

*“Look, Job” they said, “everybody knows that suffering is always caused by sin. That’s the way it always is and always will be. Now you say you are an upright man, and by all appearances you are. But Job, you must be nursing some secret sin in your life. It must be something you have done, so ‘fess up Job, and your problems will disappear.”*

*“But my life is blameless,”* insists Job. Job stands firm upon the high ground of his own innocence and integrity before God.

Job's friends don't comfort Job at all – they simply try to load him down with guilt, making him believe that he brought the whole thing down upon himself. And yet they are only echoing the ancient belief: suffering is the result of some wrongdoing of sin. It is something we did or failed to do.

What are we to think about this? Well, there is some truth in it. Sin does cause suffering. We live in a moral universe and if we break those moral laws, then we and those around us are going to suffer. We reap what we sow. *“The wages of sin is death”* says the scripture. Bad things happen because people do bad things. And people do bad things, because God has given people free will – people make moral choices and they often make terrible ones, causing harm. If God created a world where people could not sin, then people could not be free to love God. Love implies the freedom to make a choice. All this is true as far as it goes.

But though sin always causes suffering, there is some suffering that is emphatically not due to sin. Jesus said so in no uncertain terms. One day they brought him a man born blind and his disciples wanted to know if his blindness came from the man's own sin or the sins of his parents. Jesus answered, *“Neither did this man sin or his parents!”* On another occasion during Jesus' ministry, there was much talk about a particular tower falling over, killing 18 men. *“Was it because those men were worse sinners than the other people of Jerusalem?”* asked Jesus. *“I tell you, no.”*

Was it because the people of Haiti were worse sinners than others, that they should suffer an earthquake and tens of thousands of deaths?

With all due respect to religious broadcaster Pat Robertson, who has done many good things in terms of charity over the course of the years - to suggest on his TV show that the earthquake was the result of God's curse upon the Haitian people for making a pact with the devil at the time of the French occupation is simply ludicrous. His comments, which the general media loves to pick up, tends to damage the Christian cause, because the public tends to think that he is representative of the way all Christians think. That is most unfortunate.

Job's friends equated Job's suffering with some sin he must have committed. But such an answer was not comforting – nor was it true.

Another one of Job's friends offered yet another answer to the problem of Job's suffering. "No," he said, "all suffering is due not to sin, for some of it is given for discipline. It is the fire in which gold is refined. It is the anvil on which the good life is fashioned into shape." In other words, God allows us to suffer in order to make us better, stronger people.

Well, there is some truth here. Our suffering and our trials and tribulations do build character. They do strengthen us. But there is something unsatisfying about the idea that God sends trouble in order to make us better people. Try telling that to someone who is in untold agony (to someone who has just lost a child) – "You'll be better because of it." God can certainly bring good out of the bad things that happen to us – but that is more a byproduct of our predicament, than the reason for it.

Job's friends tried their best. But somehow their stock answers just didn't make sense to Job. It seemed so unfair... And so Job continues to complain.

But then God speaks to Job out a whirlwind. At first, it doesn't sound like much of an answer. But Job begins to get the point and maybe we will too.

2 "Who is this that darkens my counsel  
with words without knowledge?  
3 Brace yourself like a man;  
I will question you,  
and you shall answer me.  
4 "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?  
Tell me, if you understand.  
5 Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!  
Who stretched a measuring line across it?  
6 On what were its footings set,  
or who laid its cornerstone—  
7 while the morning stars sang together  
and all the angels<sup>a</sup> shouted for joy? <sup>1</sup>

In other words, God is saying to Job: "I am the almighty and in my wisdom and goodness I govern this world. I know what I am doing. But you, Job, have no right to question the basic goodness of this universe on the basis of your own particular trouble. Are you God? Do you know everything? Trust me, Job, even though you do not understand the reason for your suffering..."

Let me make three observations about God's answer to Job with regard to suffering:

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

First, God doesn't give Job the answer he expects. Job wants a rational explanation for his suffering and God doesn't give it to him. From the human point of view, the suffering remains a mystery, and that is how it is. On the basis of intellect alone, you and I can never find a satisfying answer to the why of suffering. The pieces of this jigsaw puzzle don't go together. We can theorize all we want, but still there is the mystery. We can talk about how we live in a fallen world, and how nature itself is not what God intended and how people make wrong choices ... but still, there just isn't a neat formula into which we can fit all the facts. Some terrible things that happen to people do appear to us to be utterly random. That's just how it is. We don't know why a person on the third floor of a hotel in Haiti was killed, while the person on the second floor came through unscathed. We won't know this side of heaven. We must live with the mystery. Pat answers – stock answers from the past – just don't do it.

Secondly, in the encounter with God in the whirlwind, Job realizes how limited his knowledge of the world really is. What Job comes to see is that his knowledge of life is limited and so narrow in perspective that he has no right to pass judgment upon the ways of God.

**42** Then Job replied to the LORD:

- <sup>2</sup> “I know that you can do all things;  
no plan of yours can be thwarted.  
<sup>3</sup> You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?’  
Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,  
things too wonderful for me to know.”<sup>2</sup>

Someone put it vividly this way: *“An insect crawling up a column of the Parthenon making his way painfully through one of the pores in the stone, is as well qualified to judge the architecture of that magnificent building as we are to pass judgment upon the infinite plans of Almighty God.”*

What do you and I know about how the universe is being governed?

And finally, since suffering is ultimately a mystery and our knowledge of the ways of God and of God's world is so limited, all we can do is walk by faith and not by sight. All you and I can do is trust the goodness of God. How do we know God is good? Because we know we have been blessed, in spite of our suffering. We know what a gift life is - how beautiful it is, in spite of hurt and tragedy. We know God is good because we have met him in Jesus.

One day God will usher in a new heaven and a new earth, and God will dwell with his people, and he shall wipe away every tear from their eyes. He will bring an end to all suffering and bring his purposes to their proper conclusion. There will be no more wars, no more famines, no more earthquakes, no more sorrow. In the meantime, we must trust what we know, that God is good and that we can trust him in faith to work all things together for good. In the end, that is all Job could do. Job didn't get a satisfying rational answer to the why of his suffering. But he got something better than that: the assurance of God's presence:

- <sup>5</sup> My ears had heard of you  
but now my eyes have seen you.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

He knows God is with him, even in his suffering. Job now “sees God.” Job learns that is not the *why* that matters so much, as the *who*. Job sees God, knows God is with him and that is enough.

The writer of Psalm 73 is concerned about reconciling the goodness of God with human suffering. He is wrestling with God’s goodness and the fairness of things. But in the end, like Job, he isn’t given so much a rational answer as an assurance of God’s presence. And for him, that is enough:

21 When my heart was grieved  
and my spirit embittered,  
22 I was senseless and ignorant;  
I was a brute beast before you.  
23 Yet I am always with you;  
you hold me by my right hand.  
24 You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterward you will take me into glory.  
25 Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.  
26 My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart  
and my portion forever.<sup>4</sup>

The psalmist is saying: “I don’t have it all figured out, Lord. Much of life is a mystery to me. But I have you, and that’s all that matters.”

25 Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

It is not the *why* of human suffering, but the *who* that matters. It is enough for us to know that there is a God who knows all about suffering. He has been there – he has walked that lonesome valley. He suffered and died as an innocent upon the cross –and rose again. And because of that wonderful truth, he is able to come alongside us in our pain and in our need and to raise us up from death to life.

The issue of human suffering is a tough one. It is a stumbling block for many. Some blame God for everything that’s wrong with the world and will have nothing to do with him. But then what do they have? A world full of trouble, with no hope and no future. In a tragedy of epic proportions, I can’t imagine not being able to turn to God.

One more thing: God hates to see people suffer! God weeps with those who weep. It was because God heard the cries of his people that he sent Moses to Pharaoh to save them from slavery. It was because God heard the cries of humanity that he sent Jesus into the world to save us from sin and death. It is because he cares about suffering humanity that he sends you and me into a world of hurt to do what we

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<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

can in God's name to alleviate human suffering. When God wants to comfort and aid someone in pain, he normally sends a human being. May our prayer be, "Here I am Lord, send me." We have talked about the *why* of suffering, and the *who*... but then there is the *what*: "*what* are you and I to do?" As we think about Haiti, few of us will physically go there to help. But our money can go where we can't. We can donate – even if it is a small amount to World Concern or to Compassion International, or to Presbyterian Disaster Assistance or to a trusted charity of your choice.

This situation calls for response on our part. God cares about suffering people, and we who are called by his name must care as well. How shall you and I respond?