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J O B *And* MINISTRY

Are We Aiding Or Afflicting?

By Mark A. Carver

How do we respond to the experience of human suffering? How do we, as a community of believers in a benevolent God, explain the pain of life that we and others suffer? Sometimes our responses are simple and formulaic: God is the rewarder of those who do good and the punisher of those who do evil. Retribution theology continues to be appropriate in many situations; moreover, if we can't make the formula work in an earthly situation, we can always paint a future scenario where accounts will be properly settled. Nevertheless, our responses to suffering become all the more difficult when the pain and suffering we are attempting to explain and alleviate have hit "good people"—people who don't deserve it. Sometimes phrases like "what goes around comes around" or "farther along we'll know all about it" just don't fit the complexities of life.

When individuals find themselves facing unmerited suffering, they often hazard to ask the risky and profound "why" questions of life. "Why should there be evil in a world created by an all-powerful, loving God?" And, more specifically: "Why is God allowing this to happen to *me*?" These are questions that are at the very core of our being, both as individuals and as a covenanted community of God. Ultimately, they are questions of meaning-making and identity-formation. In Christian terms, these "whys" are the questions of faith. Therefore, I would suggest that it is precisely these often perplexing questions which should

undergird the church's pastoral caregiving. They speak to the soul's deepest darkness in a way untouched by therapeutic techniques and pious platitudes. And the questions are not novel. They are the perennial questions of Job. If the church is to provide answers to such questions and, more importantly, to the contemporary Jobs who ask them, we would do well to encounter Job's story again. For indeed, Job judged himself a victim of undeserved suffering and demanded his day in court with a higher judge. Yet before his demand was granted, before he could start to make it better, he was forced to listen to some inadequate responses to his life situation.

One reason for the writing of the book of Job was to provide an explanation for the suffering of the righteous resulting from God's corporate punishment of his chosen people. Certainly, not everyone within the boundaries of Israel and Judah deserved the destruction and ravages of war brought upon them by their foreign oppressors. Not all of them were caught up in the wickedness of idolatry, yet all of them suffered the consequences. More contemporary examples of such suffering, of innocents swept up in forces larger than themselves, might include the Iranian Christians during Desert Storm, Bosnian Christians during that country's recent civil war, and the current victims of inner-city strife and crime in America. Each knows something of a specific type of suffering: the unmerited kind.

The book of Job spins quite a yarn about unmerited suffering. In marvelous poetic flourishes, it tells the tale of Satan's challenge to God. "Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan asks (Job 1:9). "Reach out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face" (1:11); and God takes the bet! Satan, with God's permission, obliterates Job's family, wealth, and finally, with additional consent from God, "skin for skin" (2:4), as Job's own body is afflicted with skewering sores. In the face of such disaster, Job is silent. Separated from family, community, and the God he once loved and served, he sits alone in the midst of his "dark night of the soul." As tragic as this scene may be, it is only preparatory to the main assault on Job, which comes from members of his own "support group." For it is here, in the throes of misery and despair, that Job's three friends, pseudo-pastoral caregivers, arrive on the scene.

Interpreters have all too readily cloaked these three friends in the garbs of ignorance and condescension, dismissing them as know-nothings who think they know it all. Obviously, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar are not sophisticated modern therapists with the latest book on pastoral care and counseling under their belts. Nevertheless, they have come to Job to offer care and comfort with what has served them well: traditional Hebrew theological understandings and the conventional piety of their day. Could we have done any better? They come to Job with the seemingly good intentions of comforting and sympathizing with him. At first, they offer simply their presence. They weep for him and sit with him in silence "because they saw how great his suffering was" (2:13). Following Job's first lament, they begin to offer him advice. We hear the five main theological themes of Job's three friends in the first speech of Eliphaz.

To begin with, Eliphaz asserts there is an immutable cause and effect relationship between sin and evil that terrorizes the sinners and protects the righteous. If necessary, Eliphaz could have proof-texted this "truth" with any number of scriptures from Israel's Deuteronomistic history, where obedience led to land and life; disobedience, to disfranchisement and death. Secondly, Eliphaz posits the powerlessness and inferiority of the human condition with the question, "Can mortal man be righteous before God? Can a man be pure before his maker?" (4:19). This is, of course, another theme we hear repeatedly throughout scripture, and

it continues to be perpetuated by Jesus of Nazareth: "Let he who is without sin . . ."

Thirdly, Eliphaz rightly points out that life is hard. "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward" (5:7). As a result of sin entering into creation, humans are destined to experience pain, labor, hierarchies, and a sense of futility (Gen 3:16–19). This is, at least in part, what it means to be human. The fourth theme is that God must be acknowledged as the source of hope and deliverance in whom humans must trust. "The lowly God sets on high, and those who mourn are lifted to safety" (Job 5:11). This portrayal of God is easily recognized as the God of the eighth-century prophets, who rescues the orphan and the needy and gives hope to the poor. Finally, Eliphaz observes that a person chastened by God is blessed. This insight is but an echo of some of the most profound prophetic proclamations: "Come, let us return to the Lord: God has torn us to pieces but will heal us; God has injured us but will bind up our wounds" (Hos 6:1).

Based on this understanding of life, an understanding positively and repeatedly affirmed throughout the scripture of Israel, Job's friends attempt to guide him back into the path of righteousness through personal repentance. Zophar, for example (obviously a forebear of Freud), asserts that Job is guilty of repressing his sin and of resorting to self-righteous assertion while attributing his problems to God. Therefore, Zophar and his colleagues focus their efforts on persuading Job to acknowledge and confess his sin and guilt. This is not bad advice. It is simply inadequate and inappropriate. However, in their insistence upon their perspective as absolute truth, Job's friends further afflict the afflicted. "How painful are honest words" (6:25) to the one whose pain and suffering is only intensified by hearing them. What each of Job's friends overlook is that Job is in the midst of a vacuum of meaning where life no longer makes any sense. Job's problem is not his resistance to confession; rather, it is a deep and overwhelming sense of the meaninglessness of life itself. His entire cosmology, his understanding of how the world operates, has collapsed, and along with it, his own self-identity. It is into this void that God appears as the Creator and Sustainer of a very complex and paradoxical world. God's defense is the very unveiling of this truth: that God, as Ruler of a paradoxical world, allows blameless people to suffer and the wicked to die happy. This is the truth behind the order of the world. The world is not

chaotic or disorderly; it is a world ordered, most curiously, by paradox. This is the revelation of God, which brings with it the power to redeem and to restore broken humanity. People suffer undeservedly, but they also receive undeserved grace. The meaning of the book issues from Job's response to this revelation concerning God's rulership in a world of paradox.

As a result of his encounter with this new revelation of God, Job is empowered to return to his former place in so-

Job's changed state results in his being empowered to intercede for his friends, the very friends who were pouring so much salt in his wounds.

ciety as a changed person. This is not the same Job, nor will he ever be the old Job again. Job has been transformed by the encounter of his suffering self with a new and more complete understanding of God. He is a changed person with a different view of God and of the world. He now knows intimately the mystery of God, a God whose face Job's friends have yet to see. Job's changed state results in his being empowered to intercede for his friends, the very friends who were pouring so much salt in his wounds. The salty shallow advice of his friends, which even Job may have faithfully followed and passed along to others prior to his suffering, is no longer ultimate truth for Job. It is not something upon which an individual can build self-identity or an outlook on the world. Realizing this, Job is empowered to pray for his friends' "tunnel vision." For Job has now "seen" and experienced what he had previously only "heard." It is now that the healing of his life can begin.

What might we learn from such an epic for our life together? The lessons of Job seem especially pertinent for those of us who live in an American context where suffering is to be avoided at all costs. The current "avoidance of choice" appears to be to blame personal suffering on someone else, whether parents, spouse, boss, or child. This defense mechanism, avoidance and, specifically, blaming others, can hardly be supported by the experience of Job. So what does Job's experience teach us? Let me suggest three

characteristics of Christian pastoral care and community living that might help the Jobs of today to find meaning in and through their suffering: (1) to create a church community that welcomes sufferers and suffers with them; (2) to nurture a distinct perspective on suffering and the sufferer that is always truthful in recognizing our limitations to understand it and those it affects; (3) to shepherd sufferers into the presence of the divine that they might more clearly see the face of the living God.

First, much of Job's complaint concerns the isolation that his afflictions have created. Job feels deserted by family and friends; even the face of God seems hidden from his sight. His friends treat him more like an issue or a case study than a person in pain. This is, of course, one form of avoiding the entrance into the world of the sufferer. The faith community must be, first and foremost, a place where sufferers can name and own their pain without the threat of isolation. Good pastoral care creates "safe zones" where people can probe the paradoxes of life *with* others. Certainly, much of contemporary Christianity is more comfortable with the acquiescent, unquestioning Job of chapters 1 and 2 than the Job of chapters 3–41. Nevertheless, it is the Job of chapters 3–41—probing, searching, and doubting Job—who is transformed and commended by God. We must not run from the "why" questions that doubting and suffering Jobs pose for our communities, or try to silence them with quick answers that only serve to make us feel more secure. Sufferers bring to the community of faith questions that keep it from being too comfortable with its "pat answers" about life—from becoming gods instead of continuing the search for the face of God.

On the other hand, faith communities must facilitate regular opportunities for repentance and confession—meaningful opportunities for sufferers and nonsufferers alike to be forgiven and renewed. The power of sin must not be ignored or discounted. There can be little doubt that the current American obsession with victimization needs to be confronted with the personal responsibility that accompanies an acknowledgment of one's own shortcomings, for "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The contemporary church has a tendency to dispense "cheap grace" in the name of modern definitions of love and tolerance. Is anything in our contemporary world thought less acceptable than "guilt tripping"? Nevertheless, there are those who feel a sense of guilt for good reason and need to have their feelings validated before receiving assurance that

they are forgiven. To short circuit that process is to deny authentic grace and healing.

Secondly, Christians must speak the truth about pain and suffering. There seems to come a time in every person's life when the cry for justice needs to be sounded louder than the plea for forgiveness. This is in no way a denial of a theology of retribution or an assertion of human perfection. But it is an affirmation of a truth discovered long ago: doctrinal advice and therapeutic techniques all too often ignore or repress the major "why" questions of life. They do not explain the complexities of human existence or the mysteries of the creator God. We simply do not have all the facts about suffering. The plight of the sufferer among us carries profound significance for the meaning of our relationship to God, and we cannot enter into the fray with easy answers. Advice, no matter how well-intentioned, may sometimes do more harm than good. If the popularity of fundamentalism around the globe is any indication, the advice of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar continues to be very popular. Job's three friends stand as classic examples of those who would repeat black-and-white pious phrases as sufficient explanations for the profound paradoxes of life. One can only speculate as to the advice Job's three friends might have offered to Jesus as he hung on the cross. In a strange paradox, they might have helped to place him there, because he did not fit their formula for what the promised messiah should be.

Finally, there are some questions that can only be answered by an encounter with the divine. It is this encounter

that the church is commissioned to facilitate for the world. Pastoral caregiving within the community of faith must provide a worldview that permits the protestation of suffering with the One who permits it to happen. This encounter with the God of a world of paradox brings with it the potential for a transforming moment: a transformation that does not eliminate suffering or exempt anyone from suffering, but rather provides a unique perspective on it. God invites us all to be like little children, asking the "why" questions of life, so that we will not miss the abundance of life. It is only here that we may progress through the pain and suffering to the transcendent Other waiting to embrace us in our need for steadfast love.

This, then, is our calling. We are called to form communities where suffering is recognized as a part of life, not something to be avoided or denied. We are called to provide a place where suffering, especially unmerited suffering, is met with the unmerited grace extended by the Suffering Servant who invites us to enter into the suffering of others and promises to meet us there. Effective pastoral care does not attempt to justify the ways of God to humans, but to bring the needs of suffering humanity before God. As Christians, we are not called to exonerate God, but to put people in touch with God. Then maybe, just maybe, they will be transformed and empowered to pray for us.

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