

The Answer That Isn't

When Victor Hugo said he thought the book of *Job* might be the greatest masterpiece of the human race, he had two things in mind. As a literary man he liked the poetry, and as a philosopher he liked Job for facing with such courage the most painful question we are capable of asking: *Why, in a world said to be created for happiness, is there so much suffering, and why, especially, should it fall so heavily on those who have done nothing to deserve it?* Traditional Jewish thought had upheld God's justice by arguing that the innocent do not suffer, that suffering is a punishment for doing wrong. It was a neat and tidy system which appealed to neat and tidy minds, but one honest look at what really happens in the world wipes it out.

So one day a nameless poet with unusual courage decided to challenge the orthodox religion by creating a character who would be as perfect as any man who ever lived, but who would, in spite of that, be plunged into such misery and fear as few have ever known. As I said last week, I think Job is the poet's altar ego, that the poet himself experienced the world's unfairness and wrote the book of *Job* out of his own blood. So he has his character, Job, challenge the whole moral system. Not only, he says, does God seem to make no distinctions between good and evil people, but often those who are the worst live long and prosperous lives, while those who walk in innocence and goodness are struck by tragedy. Recent example: a woman in Denver last week rushes to help a man shot by a skinhead thug — and is shot herself. Mother of two children, she will never walk again.

Because his poem is so well known, the Joban poet gets credit for having posed the problem of innocent suffering better than anyone else, but the truth is that he was not the only Old Testament author who had noticed that popular religion did not square with life. That brutally honest sceptic who wrote *Ecclesiastes* (8:14) said: “There are good people who get what the wicked deserve, and there are wicked people who get what the righteous deserve. This,” he says, “makes no sense.” The prophet Malachi admitted that people in his day were asking, “Where is the God of justice?” And the orthodox “God-takes-care-of-good-people” theology had obviously gone sour for the author of the 73rd *Psalms*, who said: ***“I envy the arrogant, the prosperity of the wicked that I see.***

They do not suffer, even in death; their bodies are healthy and sound.

They do not endure the sufferings of others, they escape the afflictions of other people.

Their eyes peer out over fat cheeks, they succeed beyond their wildest dreams.”

So the devoutly religious Job of our Biblical drama, desperately sick and lonely, dares God to explain why his life has gone to hell — and after Job’s so-called friends have failed to explain it with their simplistic faith, the author finally brings God on stage to provide the long-awaited answer to the massive unfairness of human life. But an astounding thing happens: after building up our hopes for 38 chapters, no answer is given. No justification is given for Job’s terrible agonies. When all the magnificent poetry comes to an end, the

suffering of billions of innocent people through milleniums of human life remains a mystery. Some readers decide that what it all means is that we have to accept by faith what we cannot understand, but many others have been as profoundly puzzled and disappointed by the ending of this book as I am.

In so many ways, God's appearance at the end of the drama seems irrelevant. He is full of majesty - but Job knew that all along. He rules over everthing — Job knew that. Nobody can stand up to him, and win — Job has already admitted that. None of his purposes can be defeated — Job says, "I know that." But Job's desperate question, and ours, about justice in the world is governed is not even considered. I have taught the book of *Job* in churches and in university classes, I have read dozens of books and a hundred articles about it over a lifetime, and I still do not know exactly what the author was trying to tell us by those strange last four chapters. I have come after many years to an interpretation that helps me make sense of God's grandstanding appearance in this extraordinary book, and it's only fair to share it after you have listened so well for three weeks. My conclusion is not unique; many hold it who have read *Job* carefully, but many others do not. I'll try to make it as clear as I can, so that you can more easily agree or keep looking for something better.

You may have wondered why I have stressed so often and so strongly that *Job* is a work of fiction, that the characters in the play, including God, are all creations of the author. What this means is that the author presents his own understanding of God, telling us finally that, Yes, God's world is mysterious and wonderful, but that there is no answer to why the innocent suffer. If the poet knew the answer, he would give it, but he

doesn't know it, any more than we do to this very day, so there's no way he can put an answer into the mouth of the God he creates for purposes of his drama.

Instead, the poet brings on stage a God who bullies Job without so much as a single word of pity for what has happened in the life of an absolutely blameless man. George Bernard Shaw sums up how this has affected many readers: "The pleasure we get from the rhetoric of the book of *Job* and its tragic picture of a bewildered soul cannot disguise the ignoble irrelevance of the retort of God with which [the book] closes."

Let's take a moment to see why Shaw would say that. When the Job poet's God appears out of a whirlwind, instead of pity and an explanation, he overwhelms the suffering hero with a long, drawn-out recital of how great he is, and what a worm Job is. I tried to think of an analogy that might fit this strange confrontation: imagine a college student who feels he does not deserve the failing grade that will end his career, and who comes to ask the teacher to explain why. The teacher ignores the question and says, "Look, I have a PhD from one of the greatest universities in the world. I have published 20 books and dozens of articles, and been rewarded with an endowed Chair as a Distinguished Professor. Good day, sir."

Frankly, this is what the poet's God does, challenging Job to consider the miracles of creation. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? When I presided over the birth of the ocean? Have you ever made the night go dim and the sun come up? Do you know where snow and hail are stored up? Can you command rain or lightning, or control the constellations like Orion or the Pleiades?" The language piles up in

a wild fountain of images, heaping challenge on top of challenge as if God himself were drunk on the marvel of what he had done.

And from cosmic wonders, this God turns next to the kingdom of animal life. “Can you, Job, hunt food like the mother of lion cubs? Have you seen the miracle of birth of deer and wild goats? Can you tame the wild ox? (I digress for a moment to remind you that a modern poet would not create a God who thought no human had done those things, because we have done them— seen the deer and the wild goat give birth, tamed the wild ox). But back to the God of Job, and more of his questions. Do you understand the ways of the ostrich, and why she is so stupid? Did you give the horse his strength, or teach the hawk to soar?” This is television’s *Nature* and *Wild America* and the Discovery channel all turned into poetry and put into the mouth of God, who asks poor beaten-down Job, “Can you thunder like me? Do you have an arm like mine?” It’s so overwhelming for this battered human being who has only wanted somebody to explain his suffering, that he caves in. “All right, what can I say? I carry no weight. I’ll stop talking.” We must not forget for a moment that he has had no answer to his great question. After all, he had never doubted the **power** of God; he had only questioned God’s **justice**, and God has completely ignored that question.

After this humble surrender by Job, a loving friend might have accepted his apology and the drama would come to an end, but poets like to write poetry, and this poet has a lot more of it to put into the mouth of God, so God begins all over again as if he hadn’t even heard Job’s confession. And what God does this time is

even more surprising than his lecture on earth and sky, on wild goats and prancing horses. This time he describes in lavish detail two powerful animals by combining traits of the hippopotamus and the crocodile, then adding some extragant mythical qualities. The poetry of it is so fascinating one almost forgets how odd it is to have God narrate *Wild America* while Job still waits for an answer to his moral question. There is hardly a more bizarre moment in the entire Bible. Does one say to a man who has lost his money, his house, his children, his health, and almost his very mind — “Job! Job! Look at the hippo! Ever see anything like that? Can anybody capture one of those? And the crocodile, Job, who can confront it and be safe? Who can strip off its outer garment?” (The questions wouldn’t work today, of course. We have tranquilized and captured hippos, we have safely confronted the crocodile and stripped off its skin).

The point is that this only makes sense if we keep in mind that the God who is talking is the poet’s own creation. When this God speaks, he speaks exactly the same measured, artificial Hebrew poetry which Job and his friends have used through 35 chapters. All of it, of course, is the **poet’s** language....ordinary people do not converse at great length in line after line of highly structured and magnificent verse, nor can one imagine why the Creator of the universe would follow the same rhetorical rules the poet has devised for everybody else.

And, since this is God as the poet is able to comprehend him, it comes as no surprise that this God speaks only of things familiar to any traveler in that part of the world. He does not say, “Far off, in another part of this planet, which is so much bigger than you can even imagine, there are also kangaroos and koala bears, and

if you think my ostrich is an odd creature, you ought to see the duck-billed platypus.” Instead, the animals God talks about are native to Palestine and Egypt, because the poet who writes the speeches only knows about those places.

As for Job, he gives up for the second time: “I have spoken ignorantly. Now that I see you, I repent in dust and ashes.” So ends the poetic part of the book of *Job*, with no answer given to the question that has been debated all the way through it. I suppose we should not be surprised. If a definitive answer had been given in this ancient piece of sacred literature, people would not have written hundreds of books through the centuries trying to find an answer. One thing is certain: human logic has no answer. As Ivan Karamazoff says in the great Russian novel, “There is no justification for the tears of even a single suffering child.” So, who knows? Perhaps the *Job* poet felt that if we can’t make logical sense of the way the world goes, we shall simply have to accept it and do the best we can. Another great poet says the same thing in one of the greatest sentences ever written. In the closing lines of a Greek tragedy, Aeschylus speaks of pain that “falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our despite, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.” Awful grace....not an easy faith to live by, but one way of dealing with undeserved suffering.

Here is a moment of truth about our options when life is unfair.. A minister went visiting one day, door to door in a new neighborhood. Against the odds, there were two young housewives in that neighborhood who were both in advanced stages of MS, and he had conversation with each of them separately. To the first, the

world was small, unjust, lonely and senseless. Nothing could now expand her world beyond her dinner tray.

Existence was no good at all; God should have been kinder. Five doors down, the second woman looked out the window with great yearning to be up and about and involved. It was not easy for her, but she found ways to do the compassionate works of her church and her community. When others talked of the future, her eyes sparkled with life and interest, although she admitted the future for her was uncertain. When her visitor gently asked how she could hold such an attitude, she said it was a very big world, that she was sure it would get along quite well without her, and that she had much enjoyed the privileges that had come her way and had no interest in complaining.

We will not all feel comfortable with a phrase like “the awful grace of God,” but the poetry of the book of *Job* certainly gives us no other choice. Sometimes, faced with what seems a hopeless situation, one who chooses to believe in God simply has to stop looking for logic and surrender to trust. At the end of his life, succumbing for a moment to what reason tells him, Christ cries out like Job: *Why has God forsaken me?* And like Job, he gets no answer. But in the next breath, in defiance of logic, he speaks the words of ultimate trust: “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.”

Taught all my life to seek for answers, to find truth by asking hard questions, it bothers me to have the man Job say of God, “Even though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.” Is it an absurd thing to say? Probably.....but it is an absurdity that lies at the heart of religion. With no clear answer to our most agonizing

questions, we “try to fashion something from suffering....and endure defeats without resentment.” (Walter Kaufmann, Princeton philosopher). It is not an easy creed, certainly not the creed of popular religion, but it would seem to be the philosophy recommended by the sensitive and talented man who centuries ago wrote the book we have thought about for the past three weeks. I hope the challenge of it has made you stronger, and I thank you once again for being such careful and creative listeners.

For the freedom this church offers us to think and ask questions
without fear, and for the trust which sustains us when we cannot
have answers for all our questions, we thank you, Eternal God, in
the name of One who also knew the anguish of silence. Amen