



Job's Passion For God's Presence

Struggling with the mystery of innocent suffering: the subject of the spring 1993 Sabbath school lessons.

by Jerry Gladson

Epochs of faith, are epochs of fruitfulness; but epochs of unbelief, however glittering are barren of all permanent good.

—Goethe

The book of Job bewilders the reader. Its massive form, intricate literary patterns, and annoying repetition turn many away. But beneath its forbidding exterior an intense struggle with life's most perplexing questions goes on.

Job deals with how human suffering is understood in human experience and in the context of God's justice. How should one respond when disaster strikes? How should those around the sufferer react? What is God's role, if any, in human suffering? In what

conceivable way can such pain serve the moral purpose of God? If there is a divine order, is not such uncalled-for suffering blatantly immoral?

None of these questions, including the larger issue of theodicy that lies behind them, receives a complete answer. Instead, Job experiences a vision of God—not unlike the prophets—that satisfies him by transcending his painful queries. It places the awful problem of suffering in the vivid light of the divine mystery and human limitation, along with an assurance of God's presence. But how does the divine vision respond to the dilemma of human suffering?

Let's try to clarify by reviewing briefly the major attempts to provide an adequate theodicy—all responses to a dilemma that runs something like this: If God is all-powerful, he is *able* to eradicate evil; and if God is perfectly loving, he will *want* to abolish it. Yet evil still exists. God is therefore either not all-powerful or not perfectly loving. Still worse, he could be both impotent and malicious!

Jerry Gladson, who received his B.A. from Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists and his Ph.D. in Old Testament from Vanderbilt University, wrote Who Said Life Is Fair? (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1985) from which this essay is taken. Gladson is vice president of the Association of Adventist Forums. The illustrations for this piece come from the series entitled Illustrations of the Book of Job, by William Blake.

Inadequacies of Modern Theodicies

To explain evil as a fantasy, as some Eastern faiths do, not only sounds like a gigantic “cop out,” but it in no way prepares one for the harsh realities dished out by life. If so significant a portion of human experience is illusion, how do we know that all of life, even the good moments, is not unreal?

The Augustinian freewill theodicies manage to trace evil eventually to the free moral choice of the creature and its attendant results, but they fail to tell us why God had to include evil in the range of choices in the first place. Could not the dichotomy have been between good and lesser good, rather than good and evil? Knowing the awful trail of woe that would inevitably follow from humankind’s choice of evil, why did a wise and benevolent Creator put evil in the necessarily limited range of choice?

On the other hand, to assert with Irenaeus and his modern followers that our suffering and that of all creatures in the world is called for as a means to an end, namely, the creation of a better world beyond this one, leads us to question whether so much suffering is really required. Was it actually essential that six to 12 million Jews and other disfranchised peoples perish to further the eventual aims of this new world? Would not a far fewer have been sufficient? Remember Ivan’s searching question to his brother Alyosha in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*?

“If you knew that, in order to attain this [building human destiny], you would have to torture just one single creature, let’s say the little girl who beat her chest so desperately in the outhouse, and that on her unavenged tears you could build that edifice, would you agree to do it?”¹

Alyosha’s answer—“No”—must be ours as well. The idea of climbing over the broken,

mangled bodies of our fellow human beings to achieve a “better” world, even an eternal one, too deeply offends our sense of justice.

Nor does process theodicy help matters much more. It envisions God locked in a titanic struggle with chaos and evil against which his only weapon is divine persuasion. Our suffering is but a bit of residual cosmic chaos still embedded in reality. While process thought well accounts for the world of struggle and defeat, risk and victory, chaos and order, that takes place around us, the price it exacts—we are to surrender the omnipotence, or sovereign power of God—seems too high. Its God appears far removed from the one who upholds “the universe by his word of power” (Hebrews 1:3, RSV),² with whom “all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). In process theodicy we trade the problem of theodicy for the problem of God.

A fifth approach, which is not so much a theodicy as a disposition, or attitude toward it. The tragic view pessimistically finds in the entire human phenomenon a tragedy: We are all fatally flawed, disposed by the very nature of things to suffer, often irrationally and cruelly. We are impotent. Our only response is to find some meaning in that which lies nearest at hand. “Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going” (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

But isn’t the “great controversy” approach often advocated by Seventh-day Adventists on the strength of Ellen White’s account of the origin of evil, more decisive than all these other theodicies?

The great-controversy theme belongs to the freewill family of theodicies. It traces evil to the willful, rebellious choice of Satan in heaven. This defiance of God, and hence of the good, soon spread to other angels, and eventually to humankind. Because of his incredible power—far exceeding humanity’s—Satan has even altered nature, releasing some of its devastat-

ing forces, such as storms and earthquakes.

Definitely improving the general freewill approach, it not only accounts for the problems occurring because of fateful human and superhuman choice, but also hints at some fascinating insights into natural evil. However, like other theodicies, it contains a difficulty that prevents final resolution. How does one account for the origin of evil? To locate the problem in the fall of a superhuman creature rather than a human one only transfers the issue from a human level to a heavenly plane, removing the possibility of solution even further from us. How did this perfect, wholly good, superhuman being come to choose that which his very nature intrinsically denied?

"Sin is an intruder, for whose presence no reason can be given," concludes Ellen White.



When the morning stars sang together, and all the Sons of God shouted for joy.

"It is mysterious, unaccountable; to excuse it, is to defend it. Could excuse for it be found, or cause be shown for its existence, it would cease to be sin."³

We are left still with mystery.

The major theodicies thus ultimately fail. Job, by all accounts the most profound exploration of the question ever written, contains no final answer. Where does this leave us?

Modern Theodicies and the Book of Job

To conclude that major theodicies "fail" does not mean that they do not have any value. In fact, each of them embodies insights that shed light on the problem of evil. The tragic view, for example, reminds us of an inexplicable element of tragedy in the human condition. Process theodicy suggests that the proper understanding of theodicy may lie in a more precise clarification of what it means to declare God "all-powerful." Irenaean soul-making theodicy points to the necessity of a future dimension that will resolve matters tangled at present, while freewill theodicies properly stress the crucial role of human choice in unleashing the forces of evil upon the world. Each theory casts light, but none illumines the whole. When all is said and done, the problem of theodicy intractably remains.

The Bible as a whole also avoids a definitive response. It suggests a number of solutions: divine discipline in the form of suffering (Proverbs 3:11, 12); retribution upon human sin (Proverbs 21:7); vicarious suffering, which in some way benefits others (Isaiah 53:4-6); a resolution in the next life (2 Corinthians 4:17); the effects of supernatural evil ravaging the world (Mark 1:23-26; Ephesians 6:12, 13); and the divine presence in suffering (Job). While all these, like the major theodicies above, contain insights that apply to specific cases of suffering, the sacred writers put forth none of

them as the ultimate answer to theodicy.

The genius of Job is that it does not deny the value of responsible inquiry into the dilemma of suffering. In fact, the book allows various explanations to arise in the course of the tormented struggle that finally expends itself at the divine revelation. In most cases, these approaches are cast aside, not because they are false, but because they offer at best only partial explanations, inapplicable to Job's particular situation. Modern theories really accomplish little more. They too are incomplete, relevant to some situations but not to all.

In addition to a whole series of theodicies, then, the book of Job offers a divine appearance and bids us put our trust in God in the midst of inexplicable pain. Such a response, however, contains three important elements—the mystery of God, of human limit, and of divine Presence—which help us see the connection between trust in God and our suffering.

Mystery of God

The book of Job pre-empts a solution to the enigma of suffering by locating it in the mystery of God. To claim that suffering belongs to cosmic mystery would on first glance seem to give little comfort to someone wracked with the pain of multiple sclerosis or progeria. How, then, does the category "mystery" offer hope?

Normally we think of mystery as something hidden or secret, something left unexplained. Mystery teases, lures us on to discover its explanation. The word entered our language from the Greek, where it referred to the secret religious ceremonies of the mystery religions. The Bible, however, applied it to the secret counsel or purpose of a king, or by extension, God. The New Testament then transformed this concept by setting forth mystery as a divine secret long unknown but now revealed in Christ.

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith (Romans 16:25, 26).

In one sense, then, the biblical notion of mystery involves the strategic unfolding of God's plan for the world. As such it will always—at least in this life—remain partially hidden as well as partially revealed. Only at the end, looking back, will we be able to ascertain how God has worked in our behalf, how dark chapters of our lives have fitted into the grand design. The Christ-event has special significance in the mystery, not because it unveils all of God's plans, but because it discloses in a new way his essential character and intent. God stands displayed as the incarnate one, the fellow sufferer who joins humankind in its dilemma, whose sufferings redeem a fallen world in a way that could never have been true before. Christ's death and resurrection sets humanity right with God (Romans 4:23-25; 5:19) and momentarily exposes the core of divine mystery in a dazzling fashion, permanently etching it in the human consciousness.

Although God has in Christ revealed himself in a new way, still he remains shrouded in mystery. Even Paul, who wrote so beautifully of the divine mystery, finally exclaims, "How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Romans 11:33). Divine mystery is bound up with the very being of God, placing him beyond human understanding. Therefore, in this world, "every act of unveiling must at the same time be an act of veiling; not until the final day of revelation will there be an unveiling in which there will be no veiling at all. Revelation in this age is always the disclosure of the *bidden* God."⁴ This paradox, which belongs to the very essence of

God, means we shall understand some things, others we will not. But, by faith, those we do understand illumine those we do not.

Job, of course, lies before the Christ-event of the New Testament, but the essential character of the divine mystery it proclaims forms the necessary background to it. Revelation

throughout Scripture means God discloses himself and his plan only by veiling his true glory at the same time. Luther, in fact, once spoke of the language of Scripture as the "swaddling clothes" in which Christ is laid.

Mystery lies at the heart of true religion. But its paradoxical character cuts like a two-edged

A Literary Outline of the Book of Job

More than most books, it is important to grasp the literary arrangement of Job. This may be a new thought to those who generally quote Scripture with little regard for literary context. Because random citation may support fundamentally incorrect ideas, one cannot afford the luxury of removing Jobian texts from their setting. Nor can we appeal to the exaggerated rhetoric of the characters in Job for doctrinal authority. The friends, to take but one of several examples, hold a rigid philosophy of suffering out of harmony with the general tenor of Scripture.

The literary framework consists of two prose narratives, the first of which sets forth the origin of Job's plight (chapter 1, 2), while the second and concluding one explains the character of his restoration (chapter 42:7-17).

Sandwiched between the prologue and epilogue comes the poetic dialogue (chapters 3-42:6). This poem looks at the whole matter from a human perspective: Why do the righteous suffer? What does one do when the order of life breaks up? Job the

"patient" turns into Job the "impatient." Commencing on a cynical note (chapter 3), he moves from despair to desperation to a direct challenge of God himself (chapter 31:35). Job's friends, whose speeches alternate with his and conclude with Elihu's massive harangue (chapters 32-37), offer little consolation in their insistence that piety and prosperity belong together. Only in the majestic speeches of God (chapters 38-41) are matters brought to a climax. This divine revelation swallows up Job's anguish (chapter 42:1-6) and prepares the reader for the epilogue.

The prose epilogue (chapter 42:7-17) finds Job's fortunes graciously restored in spite of his own ambivalence and calmly brings the piece to an end.

So skillfully is the book constructed that throughout it the reader uncannily senses the cosmic and existential questions, and discerns—far more than the characters—that the only solution to Job's dilemma is found somehow in God.

A brief outline of the contents will help the reader to visualize the major elements of Job:

- I. Prologue: The testing of Job (chapters 1, 2).
- II. Dialogue between Job and his friends (chapters 3-31).
 - A. Job's lament (chapter 3)
 - B. First cycle of speeches
 1. Eliphaz and Job's response (chapters 4-7)
 2. Bildad and Job's response (chapters 8-10)
 3. Zophar and Job's response (chapters 11-14)
 - C. Second cycle of speeches (chapters 15-21)
 1. Eliphaz and Job's response (chapters 15-17)
 2. Bildad and Job's response (chapters 18, 19)
 3. Zophar and Job's response (chapters 20, 21)
 - D. Third cycle of speeches (chapters 22-28)
 1. Eliphaz and Job's response (chapters 22-24)
 2. Bildad and Job's response (chapters 25-28)
 - E. Job's final defense (chapters 29-31)
- III. The speeches of Elihu (chapters 32-37).
- IV. The divine speeches (chapters 38-42:6).
- V. Epilogue: The restoration of Job (chapters 42:7-17).

sword. In the book of Job, where we can discern several approaches to the divine mystery, the suffering Job fears the awful mystery of God (chapters 23:15; 31:23), while the friends neatly categorize it and enlist it on their side (chapter 5:9-16).

When we overemphasize the radical distance between God and humankind, it breeds skepticism, as we see in Ecclesiastes where divine providence appears to the author so deeply buried in secrecy that one cannot find it (cf. chapter 6:10-12). All of us know what it is like when others important to us do not explain their actions or give any clue as to what they plan to do next. We become suspicious, distrustful, even skeptical, of their intentions. Because God and his ways are hidden from normal observation, it is all too easy to conclude he is "distant," as in deism, or that he is nonexistent, as in atheism.

A few years ago the ABC television network presented a docudrama entitled *SOS Titanic*. The film told the story of the tragic sinking of the ocean liner *Titanic* in 1912. In the closing scene aboard the *Carpathia*, the British vessel that picked up the survivors from the icy grip of the north Atlantic, a woman sympathetically offered a tray of coffee and sandwiches to a bereaved cluster of widowed women with their children. Unresponsive, they preferred to gaze at the trackless ocean where tiny white icebergs dotted the cruel dark-blue water. The woman with the sandwiches broke the tense silence: "You must not lose faith in the Almighty. It was God's will—in his infinite love and mercy—that the ship go down." She was trying to be helpful.

The survivors ignored her. Finally, a nameless woman slowly looked back from the sea. "No coffee. No God either! God went down with the *Titanic*!"

But Job shows us divine mystery need not take us this far. Rightly understood, it leads to

a deepened faith.

Mystery exists all around us—the mystery of life, genetics, language, human personality, and so on. Without it, life would quickly become boring, for the challenge would have disappeared. People attend schools, colleges, and universities because they want to push back the mystery of a certain field of knowledge. We cannot live without mystery. It will always be there.

God, however, is the central mystery. He is the mystery that ends all others. If we find the world mysterious, is it any wonder we find ultimate reality even more so? "In the case of God," Gordon Kaufman reminds us, "we are not just speaking of a limit of experience; we are speaking of the *absolute limit*, the limit of all limits."⁵ Because our understanding and dispositions are limited, God remains distanced from us. His distance, however, is not one of space or time, hence our scientific observation will never overcome it. Rather, as John Hick suggests, it is "epistemic." He means that God does not impose himself upon us without our desire for him to do so, without "an uncompelled response of faith."⁶ A very ancient psalm, when referring to the exodus from Egypt, concurs: "Thy way was through the sea, thy path through the great waters; yet thy footprints were unseen" (Psalm 77:19).

Faith, in other words, "unveils" the mystery



Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind.

in a way that completely escapes unfaith. "He is not far from each one of us," faith affirms (Acts 17:27). Faith can make such an assertion because it finds in mystery the stuff of awe and wonder, not ignorance. The more we know about an individual, the more mysterious he or she becomes. In a good marriage, couples find out how mysterious they really are to each other as, paradoxically, their knowledge about each other increases. "The revelation of God overwhelms us with wonder because we sense his hiddenness and mystery," observes Wayne Oates. "This mystery is not ignorance but the feeling of the tether of our minds." Oates goes on to note that the sense of mystery increases in knowing because "the object of wonder ceases to be just an object and becomes a reality that has reached out, *presented* itself, and we are grasped by it. The It ceases to be an It and becomes a Thou."⁷

God personally comes to one who opens



Behold now Behemoth which I made with thee.

up in faith to him, renewing his spirit and assuaging his despondency. But it is a personal encounter, not a set of abstract reasons. It does not necessarily answer questions. Instead they are transcended in the silencing wonder and awe. God comes to Job personally. While the friends can speak only *about* God, Job speaks *to* him, and he to Job. In that divine moment the suffering victim finds rest.

When God speaks to Job, he ties the creation closely to himself. He proclaims the unity of all things under his sovereignty. This unity "cuts off every tragic outlook upon life, every tragic way of thought, at the root."⁸ God is not a despotic, capricious ruler, but one deeply sympathetic with humanity (Psalm 8:1-5). What we see of him in what he has revealed, especially in his Son, only reinforces the conviction that behind the larger mystery lies the same throbbing compassion: God is for us.

I am speaking here of a faith that both accepts and surrenders to the mystery of God. Faith is not an emotion. It is not the rational conclusion of an argument. Nor is it the will to believe against all odds, a leap in the dark. Rather, faith combines emotion, rationality, and choice in a unity, just as the human personality is itself a unity. Therefore it has elements of emotion, will, and rationality. Because it anchors itself securely within the evidence, it has a rational side. And because it goes beyond the evidence, it preserves its character as faith.

The devil, Screwtape, in C. S. Lewis's classic tale, cautions Wormwood against the "dangers" of such trust. "Our cause [the work of evil] is never more in danger," he says alarmingly, "than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's [God's] will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."⁹

Human Limits

The counterpart of this awesome divine mystery is clearly a willingness on our part to acknowledge our proper place in the divine economy. In simple language, human limit means we plainly admit the mystery of God and stop chafing because we don't know certain things about it. But such a bald statement too easily leads to cynicism. If God is going to be so arbitrary, it is better to resist him! Blaise Pascal once declared that humanity tends toward a wrong judgment of matters because of its denial of what religion must teach us—that our predicament is absolutely incurable outside of God's grace. He may be close to the truth. Our human pride does not wish to admit its limitations. So when the choice lies between skepticism and pride or faith and humility, we choose some variety of skepticism.

As we pause to consider, however, the real limits of our knowledge and understanding, we gasp in amazement. Although he wrote three hundred years ago, Pascal was certainly correct when he described the most brilliant human being as possessing a "learned ignorance." When one can't even keep up with a single field of knowledge, the sum total of humankind's rapidly accumulating wisdom is simply staggering. In my own field—Old Testament studies—to read all the articles and books published in a single year would probably take nearly 20 or 30 years. Those of us in academia sometimes get the feeling we are sinking in a quagmire of "learned ignorance"! But what about the infinity that we do not know?

What about our understanding of God, the central reality? Zophar, you will recall, reminds Job that he could not penetrate the "deep things of God" or "find out the limit of the Almighty" (chapter 11:7). Admitting our limit, such as Job eventually had to do (chapter 42:3), shatters our all-too-insistent grasp on

what we have done as a recommendation before God. It means that not only do we have no moral purchase, but no intellectual or spiritual either. Before God we are helpless and dependent. Our vision extends only so far—beyond it stretches the boundlessness of God. Even our ideas of God are not exempt from inquiry. C. S. Lewis once mused, "My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence?"¹⁰

When Job therefore accepts the mystery of God and relinquishes his claim to understand, he at last finds peace. Faith ventures beyond reason and confronts God directly. It goes beyond reason, but really lies in continuity with it. We find true faith and power only by embracing reality. "Faith is not belief in spite of evidence; it is personal commitment regardless of consequences."¹¹

Divine Presence

Above all else, suffering causes alienation. It isolates us from friends, family, our normal way of living, and from God. In her influential study of death, psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross devotes an entire chapter to the isolation produced in both victim and relations when death is imminent. In fact, among the five stages of grief, she includes denial and isolation as the initial one.¹²

Not surprisingly, Job experiences such isolation. His friends come to comfort, but soon leap to defend God, and the suffering man receives theology and doctrine instead of sympathy. One senses an increasing alienation between him and the friends as the poem progresses. Torn by his pain, he agonizes through conflicting emotions, fearing the hiddenness of God, yet desiring him. Finally, with only jackals and ostriches as his

companions (chapter 30:29), he turns—alone—to face the whirlwind of God.

The answer to isolation—alienation—is presence. The presence of someone who cares deeply.

So God comes to Job, breaking his isolation. Significantly, it does not happen after Job acknowledges the divine mystery or admits his own shortsightedness, but *before*. An act of grace, it leads to Job's surrender: "Now my eye sees thee" (chapter 42:5).

The author does not give us the precise details of how God approached. From the brief wording (chapters 38:1; 40:6), we gather it must have been similar to the way he came to the prophets (cf. Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1; Ezekiel 1)—by direct vision, in other words. Of course, he may manifest himself in any number of ways. For example, Scripture refers to his addressing humanity by a set of circumstances that time finally reveals as a link in his purposes (Genesis 45:4-7), through a fellow human being (Acts 9:17), through Scripture (chapter 17:11), by the influence of accumulated wisdom (Proverbs 1:20-2:6), and, surprisingly, even through one's enemy (2 Chronicles 35:20-22; cf. 2 Kings 23:29, 30)!

When God comes to Job, Job accepts him. Like Paul, Job proclaims the good news, only he does so negatively. The book indicates that even the perfect man has no claim on God



I have heard thee with the hearing of the ear, but now my eye seeth thee.

because of his good works. Only as Job relinquishes his demand can he come to experience the real fullness of the grace of God. Outside of a relationship of grace—that is, of love—even the perfect man has no automatic title to real life. Only as loved by another is a person truly alive. Job comes through a severe crisis, and the revelation of God at first overwhelms him, but the Lord draws near and sides with him. The epilogue of the book tries to tell us that God's grace has now been profusely extended. The Lord "restored . . . gave . . . blessed," it says (chapter 42:10-12), all Hebraic expressions of divine presence.

But what role does suffering play?

We have seen earlier that without the link between suffering and guilt, suffering, insofar as it concerns God's role, becomes inexplicable, even scandalous in our minds. Now, the whole matter gets turned on its head: Job, the innocent, becomes Job the sufferer. Innocence—not guilt—comes into strange association with suffering.

Centuries after Job, innocence would once again dramatically step within the sphere of suffering. In Jesus, the innocent, suffering acquires radical meaning, resulting in an astonishing exchange: "Christ was innocent of sin, and yet for our sake God made him one with the sinfulness of men, so that in him we might be made one with the goodness of God himself" (2 Corinthians 5:21, NEB). The incarnation integrates suffering, innocence, and divine presence into a whole. In Christ the disruption of sin and suffering provides the precise means by which sin, and eventually suffering, is healed. "Being killed (as man) by death," Augustine put it, "he [God, in his humanity] killed death."¹³ Jesus relieves and repairs the disruption. And in him the power of sin, suffering innocence, and the presence of Almighty God emerge. This was "to show his justice," Paul triumphantly exclaims (Romans 3:25, lit. trans.). Although it does not

explain suffering, it once and for all divests it of its moral implications and renders it the instrument of redemption. God himself becomes a partner with humanity in suffering, and lifts human tragedy into the perspective of salvation. If humans are condemned to a tragic fate, God joins them in drinking the hemlock.

In Jesus, God does not just approach humanity, but takes its place, to suffer himself. The incarnation is the answer to theodicy because it demonstrates God's willingness at the deepest possible level to assume the blame for a creation gone awry and to redeem it by the very instrumentality of its alienation.

Job, of course, cannot see how the providence of God can take up his affliction and transform it into redemption. However, his sufferings do become the means by which through a tortured experience he rises to a new awareness of God. We can often see it in our own lives—the illness that brought a family closer together, the death that led someone back to God. The soul-making theodicy capitalizes on this function of suffering, but while we cannot claim that every act of suffering has a redemptive purpose, we can say that the way we look at suffering can. We can relate to it in such a way that it becomes for us a strengthening experience.

How do we really know God is with us in suffering? How do we know he really cares? Perhaps he exists only in imagination, a wish-fulfillment to ease the pain?

Some find it easier to believe that no God exists than to believe he sustains the world in its present condition. A student of mine, troubled by all this, expressed his thoughts in a poem:

If God's in the SS man,
In the force of the powder
In the mass of the bullets,
In the clear cool air through which it flies
hot and fast and straight,
In the praying Hasid,

In the gore spewing behind,
In the grass it lands on,
In the ashes of a scroll,
In jeers, "It never happened!"
In tears of those who wonder . . .
WHY?¹⁴

It is not easy to answer such a question. But we can make a few observations.

Remember Job's search for God (chapter 23:3, 8, 9)? He knew the experience of those who find it difficult to believe. In fact, the apparent absence of God from the world deeply troubles modern human beings. When you stop to realize it almost 2,000 years have passed, if we accept the scriptural record, since any dramatic act of divine redemption has taken place. It gives one cause to wonder. Theologians now speak wistfully of the "absence," the "hiddenness," the "eclipse" of God, and have a hard time explaining it.

We have no absolute guarantees that God is present. But no guarantees does not mean no good reasons. While certain things count against his existence, such as theodicy, a cumulative body of evidence makes it entirely reasonable to affirm his reality. Clark Pinnock, for instance, speaks of God as a "reasonable probability" and notes that we cannot manage any more than this whatever our view of the world. He cites five categories of evidence: the practical value of the Christian faith; the authenticity of religious experience; the mystery of the universe; the historical events claimed by Judaism and Christianity; and the power of the Christian gospel can be checked out in the ordinary ways we verify the things we know.¹⁵ Although we cannot conclusively demonstrate the existence of God himself in this way, still evidences of his reality are all around.

Religious faith begins an experience—it does not come to birth in philosophical analysis. But that doesn't mean religious faith disregards rationality. Rather, it has already found its

Object before the reflection on the nature of the experience takes place. Convinced of God's reality, the believer consequently knows that a solution to the problem of evil exists somewhere, even though he or she cannot find it. Given the ways of God known by experience, believers remain convinced of the ultimate resolution of the chaos of life. "For we have to do here with a mysterious and transcendent Reality which we cannot wholly understand. The ways of God are not our ways, and how His purposes come to fruition we cannot always know."¹⁶ Like Job, they realize that the meaning they seek actually does exist, but that they will never be able in this world to obtain it.

This, I believe, represents the book of Job's contribution to the dilemma of theodicy. Although it does not logically explain suffering, nor does it forbid our attempts to understand, it goes beyond them by uniting a personal experience of God with humble, trusting faith. In other words, Job comes to trust God in spite of his pain.

The grandeur of his final experience, however, seems very remote from where most of us stand. It is a powerful vision, but difficult to live. When pain comes to us, we more often than not resemble the Job of the dialogue than the one after the divine speeches. In my own life I find it difficult to get from the former to the latter. Too often I react angrily at the apparently senseless suffering I see around me, becoming frustrated at the mangled lives and furious that I can do nothing about it. But because the Bible contains a book like Job, I know God can take my situation—anger and all—and transform it, just as he did Job's.

Often we feel we must satisfactorily answer life's perplexing questions in order to verify our faith. In that respect we are no different from Job's friends. To the contrary, the book of Job eliminates misguided attempts to figure out the causal relationship between God and his world. God will not be placed under

restriction. He must remain free "to root justice where He pleases."¹⁷ Old answers will not always work in new situations. Indeed, the power of new, untried experiences often contradict them. An understanding of God and his ways impels us on to ever greater risks and new dimensions of discovery. "God and heaven alone are infallible," Ellen White candidly points out. "Those who think that they will never have to give up a cherished view, never have occasion to change an opinion, will be disappointed."¹⁸ We must let God be God.

Caught up in a labyrinth of pain, we struggle to make some sense of it all. We feel raped by the cruel tragedy of life. We do learn from Job that suffering is no reflection on our morality. That is good news. Nor should we think of pain as evidence of the loss of God. Rather, it may be a token—strange and inexplicable—that he is with us, on our side, approving of us. The very hiddenness of God, in other words, may only mask his lingering presence.

Just as the Creator did not desert Job when life tumbled in, so we also are objects of his compassion. In moments of despair we are called to faith. The book of Job makes one thing clear: We can no longer assuage our suffering and that of others by the use of pat answers. Instead, we are to identify with pain, concede its tangled complexity, and rest in a humble faith mature enough to coexist with enormous dilemmas.

We do not get a fully rational explanation of evil from the book of Job, or from anywhere else for that matter. Like the fact of sin, suffering is ultimately mysterious. We can expect resolution of the enigma of human suffering in the context of God's justice to appeal to religious people, those for whom the reality of God is the starting point. Although left unexplained, suffering remains a summons to action.

We live by hope, a hope grounded in the

cross of the Innocent Sufferer. The cross compels us to listen to suffering as an abiding question, one piercing straight to the heart of God. Like Job, we find our solution not in rational categories, but in the vivid presence of

God—God the sufferer, the overcomer. We are convinced that beyond suffering and death lies resurrection and life in the appearance of Christ “to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:28).

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