

Why is The Way the Way of Suffering?

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Today's Old Testament lessons feature the third reading in a row from the book of Job, which is perhaps the most sublime and provocative book in the Bible. It wrestles with a question that has perplexed me for decades: why do good people suffer?

Let's pause to clarify what we mean by "suffering". Suffering is not simply pain. *Pain* is an experience of hurting, something synchronic (i.e., at a time) you experience only in the present. But *suffering* is diachronic (i.e., across time): the one who suffers can remember past pain and anticipate future pain. Each time a man being tortured is struck in the face he feels pain; but he *suffers* in anticipating that he's going to be struck over and over again until he relents.

The book of Job is an ancient story that functions as a study on suffering. Job, recall, was blameless and upright: a man of integrity. But, Satan bets God that even Job will curse God if only Job is humiliated in his body. So, God gives Job over to Satan, who inflicts loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his feet to the crown of his head. Job is reduced almost to nothingness. All he can do is sit among the ashes and scrape his sores. His wife tries to persuade him to curse God and die. But Job maintains his integrity. Job's friends scorn him and abandon him; he loses his wife, children, and all his possessions; but Job maintains his integrity. Even so, Job doesn't take all this lying down. He calls on God to listen to his arguments: 'hey, look, God, I'm a righteous man. I've done everything you've asked me to do. I've followed all the rules. You should give me what I'm due, for you are just and good. But, you won't listen to me. You won't even show your face.'

Well, in today's lesson we read that God *does* answer Job. In a passage of sublime poetry, The LORD answers Job out of the whirlwind:

"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up your loins like a man,

I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
 Tell me, if you have understanding.
 Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
 Or who stretched the line upon it?
 On what were its bases sunk,
 Or who laid its cornerstone
 When the morning stars sang together
 And all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

The LORD goes on for *four chapters* enumerating all the great things he has done in creation, and revealing to Job the immensity of the job, the mind-boggling complexity of creating a colossal world with all its interdependent parts that must function together to make the world we live in, with all its diversity and opportunity for growth. God is, in effect, saying to Job: ‘with your finite pea-of-a-brain, do you really think you could understand my purposes, including my reasons for allowing you to suffer?’ As we will see in next week’s reading, Job eventually relents, gives up his arguments, and relinquishes his demand that justice as he understands it be given to him. His work, he realizes, is to live rightly with integrity. It is not his place to demand that he not suffer.

Despite our first reaction to the LORD’s seeming harsh and mocking response, on reflection I think there’s something very reasonable about it. We live in an unbelievably complex world. And there is an infinite distance, so to speak, between the powers of our finite mind and an infinite mind. We may literally be incapable of understanding the purposes that an infinite source of being would have in creating a world, including the ultimate purposes for the suffering we all experience.¹

But, even if this is so, we are still left with the pressing existential question of what to think about our suffering and how to respond to it. Religions offer answers that can aid us in living with meaningful lives despite suffering. Some

¹ This perspective is the main of idea of what philosophers of religion call *skeptical theism*, which I have contributed to in my “Minimal Skeptical Theism” in *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, eds. Dougherty & McBrayer (Oxford University Press, 2014) 63-75.

religions teach that *avoiding* suffering is the path toward the good life.

Christianity isn't one of them. Christianity teaches that the path toward the good life necessarily goes through suffering.

As Jesus said, "Whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). And "Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:39). Whatever carrying one's cross or losing one's life for Jesus' sake entails, it includes suffering. There are over 100 New Testament verses stating or implying that to follow Jesus is to walk a path of suffering. For example, the writer of 1 Peter says, "To suffering you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:20-21). And, as Luke writes in Acts: "We must endure many afflictions to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

But, why? Suffering doesn't sound good at all. Why the New Testament emphasis on suffering? What's it good for? Let's take a look at a few suggested answers:

A Test of Faith

One idea is that suffering provides a *test* of our faith. In 1 Peter, we read: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ" (1 Peter 4:12-13).

Our faith really is tested when we suffer. When things are going well, it's easy for us to rest on our laurels. Suffering can serve as a wake-up call. Suffering can bring out our anger, our fear, our self-pity, and it can dampen our hope. Suffering therefore, can test our faith. Why do we need tests of our faith? I think the answer is pretty simple: to show us where we are on the path to perfection.² We humans

² Some people bristle at the idea that perfection is something for us to aspire to. "To err is human", they say. But, I suppose that they really have short-sighted concerns in mind. Given the complexity of the situations we find ourselves in quite often, the best we can do falls short of the best thing that could be done; consequently, we infer (often rightly) that perfection is out of the question. But, I take it almost everyone would prefer to be perfect. Christianity teaches that those in Christ are indeed being perfected, but it also intimates that this might be an infinite process (see, e.g., 2 Corinthians 3:18).

are highly skilled in self-deception. Suffering can reveal to us the real limits of our own spiritual transformation toward the good.

A Pointer to God's way

Another biblical suggestion is that suffering points us to God's way and thus to what is actually good for us. Given our sorry moral and spiritual state, suffering may well be the only way we can find our way onto the good path, which is hard for us to keep focus on. Have you ever noticed how often the Hebrew prophets call out the usual, dominant way of thinking and living as *bad* rather than good? Our way is the way of power, prestige, wealth, and fame. We don't celebrate the poor, the marginalized, and the dispossessed. We look down on them. But, Jesus tells us we have it upside down. We're so deep in the grip of the idea that life is a kind of competition, in which the point is to rise up as high as we can in the social hierarchy, that we have no idea what to make of Jesus's beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn.... Blessed are the meek.... Blessed are the merciful.... Blessed are the peacemakers. (Matthew 5)"

Please notice that all those Jesus pronounces as blessed are sufferers. Why are they blessed? Having suffered greatly, they know what it is like to suffer. When you have suffered yourself, you can have compassion for others who suffer. Who are the ones who can really feel what it is to suffer from food insecurity. The answer is obvious on reflection. As Paul says to the Galatians: "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). Poor, dispossessed, and marginalized people have always been better at carrying other people's burdens than are those with lots of resources. Did you know that poor people, on average, give a much higher percentage of their income to others than do middle class and rich people?³ Let that sink in.

It is the poor, the dispossessed, and the marginalized that we need to listen to, for they are the experts on suffering. They are the ones who see it, not just at

³ See "Poor Americans Are Country's Most Charitable Demographic" in *Philanthropy News*: <https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/news/poor-americans-are-country-s-most-charitable-demographic>

special times we all face, such as during a sickness or at the death of a loved one, but every day. Spiritual transformation does not easily get going from middle-class or upper-class values. All the great spiritual writers tell us that it begins from a place of humility. We must see how our own privilege has blinded us before we can begin moving toward the good. The spiritual way up, so to speak, requires us to go down—way, way down into the depths of our being where we find that we are, really and truly, on the same footing with all human beings.

But, why is this work in self-denial and humility necessary? I think it's because, without it, we simply cannot live in peace in what the New Testament writers call the Kingdom of God. Many people today hear the term 'the kingdom of God' as short for a place where a King lords over people, determining what they can and can't do, whether they want to or not—a place without freedom or fun. But, this is badly mistaken. Unlike us, everybody in New Testament times lived in a kingdom. By calling it the *Kingdom of God*, they were simply stressing that it's not what we're used to; it's *actually* the good place, a situation in which all people live in peace with each other, a reality in which every person has dignity, purpose, and respect—where everybody belongs. It is a social structure of flourishing harmony for all. This is the biblical notion of the good life.⁴

Paul tells us that we are the body of Christ.⁵ If any part of your body is hurting or injured, you care about it and seek to heal it. Suppose we took seriously Paul's idea of the human family as the body of Christ. Then those of us with resources would want to help those of us who are sick, poor, or suffering, because we'd see them as part of us. By taking them and their suffering into our care and concern, we'd gain the compassion we need to see our own flourishing as depending on everyone else's flourishing.

⁴ The notion of lasting peace as an ideal runs through much of the Bible, from the Hebrew idea of *shalom*—which is what the ancient Hebrew rules and regulations were designed to promote—to Jesus's offer of God's peace to those who follow him, to John's vision of heaven in *Revelation*. The other biblical ideal, which is of course consistent with lasting peace, is *glory*.

⁵ See 1 Corinthians 12.

The Way of Creation

Another reason I think suffering is built into following Jesus pertains to the unfolding creation: the world is in constant, unwavering development. The very pattern of God's creation is *change*. And change means that old things pass away and new things come into being. New things don't come into being for us without some suffering. How have I (we?) missed this point? My guess is that we don't want to see it. We don't like change. Fearing change, we grasp onto some way of life that worked for us in the past, some imagined golden era when people knew the rules and followed them or were put in their place. There are two evils lurking here. One is that our imagined golden era, say, 1950s America before all the civil unrest exploded, always benefits people like us who have that vision over and against people who aren't like us.⁶ The other lurking evil is that this impulse to solidify the social structure and to cement the rules goes against the very nature of God's creation, which is constant new creation.

Jesus never tells us to go back. Just the opposite. Time and space are moving forward and outward. New possibilities, new creation, is always on the horizon, if only we'll look for it. Jesus is constantly working to include *more* people, not to keep more people out. Jesus gets into trouble because he breaks the rules structured to maintain a social hierarchy designed to reward the rich and powerful and demonize the poor, the dispossessed, and the marginalized. We don't find Jesus out there railing against gay people, or transgender people. We don't find Jesus doing anything like asserting his freedom not to wear masks in the midst of a global pandemic. The only people Jesus rails against are the religious leaders of his day who, as he says, are actually keeping people *out* of the kingdom of heaven, which is expansive and radically inclusive.⁷

How inclusive? Well, we certainly cannot live at peace in the kingdom of heaven with maniacs and warmongers. This is precisely why Jesus is a healer. He showed us by example that *our* work just is to heal, both ourselves and others,

⁶ A useful exercise: when you hear someone harken back to some earlier, better time when life was supposedly good, ask yourself, were there any people who *didn't* benefit from that social structure? My guess is that, with the possible exception of the Genesis story about the garden of Eden, the answer will be 'yes'.

⁷ See especially Colossians 1:19-20.

and we are to be concerned with the whole person, body, mind, and spirit.⁸ Why? Because every single person is a precious child of God, because each of us is a part of one body, and therefore the good of all of us is bound up with the good of each of us. And this work of healing, of both ourselves and others, is an enormous task that cannot be done without suffering.

Conclusion

So, what are we to do about suffering? My message here is this: Jesus is our guide: God's pattern of creation is a world of ongoing progressive change. We are thus not called to stagnation but to ongoing newness of life. Living in this world will produce suffering, not only for the loss we experience as cherished things pass away and are replaced by new things, but also as we undergo the necessary transformation that will fit us for living in a world of lasting peace where everyone belongs and flourishes in an unbelievably complex society including all of creation. But, if the New Testament writers have it right, the suffering will be worth it. As Paul puts it in Romans: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18); and in 2 Corinthians: "Our momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Corinthians 4:17). And finally Jesus assures us that suffering is not our destination but rather our path to it: "In the cosmos you will have trouble. But, take heart—I have conquered the cosmos" (John 16:33).⁹

⁸ This isn't to suggest that we're all supposed to be doing the same specific things. The project of healing is enormous and extremely complex, requiring a great variety of jobs.

⁹ There is so much *more* to say about the Christian way of suffering. To mention one very important example: the suffering in being *persecuted* for Christ's sake is a major New Testament concern. I hope to share some thoughts about persecution in a future address.