

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING AND THE BOOK OF JOB

It is almost a truism to state that one of the most urgent problems of this day and age which confronts the social responsibilities of Christianity is that of disease and suffering, and that there is an immediate need for a re-interpretation and greater understanding of that age-old problem, and of its spiritual implications. Nevertheless, it still remains true that there is probably nothing which has quite so telling and far-reaching an effect on the religious convictions of an individual than the incidence of personal suffering, whether as a result of disease or not. The annals of history teem with persons of otherwise mature action who have discarded their religious convictions because after what seems to them sincere and honest efforts to evaluate the situation, they have been unable to reconcile the depth, extent and apparent injustice of suffering in the world generally, and in particular as they themselves have been affected.

Against this, however, it is necessary to set the multitudes who have plumbed the depths of human suffering, and who have emerged from that experience with a vastly wider conception of the scheme of things, enriched and ennobled by the dominant spiritual tone which has supplied for them a means of probing the mystery. To arrive at such a frame of mind posits an experience which calls for some explanation, and which will be considered subsequently in this paper. At this stage it is enough to point out that the problem is one of immense proportions, and that it occupies an important place in human life.

Our own generation has witnessed the attack on the problem by a vast concentration of scientific forces, spurred on by the urgency of discovering timely and practicable solutions to the issues involved. Neither money nor material has been lacking, and the question of suffering, particularly that aspect of it which is exhibited in the development and dissemination of disease, has challenged the best efforts of highly skilled men and women. For that reason it is vitally important that we should be able to offer to humanity an interpretation of the situation in terms of Christian experience which is fully cognisant of and sympathetic towards the scientific movement.

This is of particular significance for the clergy, since it is clear that a pastor who has not faced up realistically to the implica-

tions of the whole problem of suffering and disease is hardly likely to be able to meet the needs of his people. The sober fact is that in so many cases the incapacity of the minister in this direction produces in his people a conviction that the problem is completely beyond his powers of attack and solution, and in despair they turn elsewhere for advice which should have been his prerogative to give. If they are exploited in the process, the problem is only deepened as far as they are concerned.

We must make clear at this point that in a discussion of the problem of suffering we are not dealing with something which is of passing moment, or which is an isolated concern. We can never come to any understanding of the spiritual significance of the issue of suffering unless we are clear regarding our views of the nature of God, the purpose of life, and the relation between them. So many of the wrong conclusions presented for our consideration from time to time are the result of muddled thinking based on untrue or only partially correct premises.

Because the problem is at once age-old and deeply theological, we can perhaps most conveniently consider it in relation to its profoundest Biblical expression in the Book of Job, where the human and divine aspects of the issue are clearly set forth. That this book is no casual exposition of family fortunes in antiquity, but rather a statement of timeless significance regarding the entire issue, has been recognized by commentators for centuries. What is not always made clear, however, is the precise and apposite manner in which the book deals with a problem which has perplexed man from earliest times, and which we shall endeavour to expound.

We are introduced in the book to a patriarch in the land of Uz, a prosperous landowner with a large, happy family. His performance of those religious duties which are his portion through the call of duty and the prompting of conscience is punctilious and exact. His relationships with his family and friends exhibit marks of love and respect of an order rare in our own day. Life for him is very pleasant, and his righteousness, of which he is very conscious, has indeed been acknowledged by God.

But then we are given a glimpse behind the scenes of this drama, where the adversary is in conference with the Almighty, and where the depth and the sincerity of Job is called into question by being equated with decency and respectability which in reality is designed to further his own ends in life. The

prose introduction with which the book opens, depicts God as allowing the adversary to test Job by affliction and suffering without his person being harmed. When all this takes place it is borne with exemplary courage and fortitude, and it makes no appreciable impact upon the faith of Job. So far, it appears, the adversary has failed in his testing. He avows that the "success" of Job was due to the fact that the suffering has not affected his own person, and is granted permission by God to send upon Job acute personal plagues.

Exactly what the affliction was which troubled Job is not clear. The word for "boil" (*shēchin*) is elsewhere rendered by "sore" or (inflamed) ulcer, as in the Egyptian plagues which "broke forth with blains upon man and upon beasts". It may have been the "botch of Egypt", where the same Hebrew word is used to describe a swelling or eruptive discoloration of the skin, and this may have been similar to the cutaneous symptoms of elephantiasis or "black leprosy".

At all events we see the formerly happy and successful man oppressed by a series of misfortunes, culminating in personal affliction and intense suffering, happening without any apparent reason and completely beyond human control. As we well realize, this pattern of events is constantly being re-enacted, and this factor gives the book its timeless nature and appeal. One very significant point for our later discussion is that we see clearly depicted in the book the fact that even worse to Job than the incidence of physical agony was the mental distress which he underwent, his agonized grappling with the problem of the rationale of things—*why* this should happen to him of all people. In the ensuing speeches made by Job and his friends, Bildad, Zophar and Eliphaz, we see the essence of the message which the book has for us regarding the problem of suffering and disease.

The friends whose observations occupy a considerable proportion of the book came in traditional Oriental manner to sit with him and to comfort him in his affliction and loss. As the discourses unfold, they are represented as being sympathetic towards Job, but it becomes increasingly clear that they are concerned primarily in maintaining their own religious position. For them the matter is so simple that it makes further discussion superfluous. Job is a sinner, and as a result is being punished by God for his iniquity. This standpoint is stated with such

obvious sincerity by Job's friends that their remarks smack of self-satisfaction and naïve smugness.

Even the opening speech of Eliphaz, which is not particularly controversial, and which presents his views in a mild and generalized manner, seems to indicate that for him also there is no real problem. There is no real "giving" of the self to the situation, no proper appreciation of the tragedy which has beset Job, no real sympathy for the man himself. It is clear that the weight, the mystery and the intensity of the problem escapes them completely. At best they can only assert that the way of the transgressor is hard, and when Job has at last convinced them by voluble protest and reasoned assurance that he is completely innocent of any fault of which he is aware that may have resulted in the suffering and affliction, his friends are hurt and shocked.

The reason for this latter state of mind is not hard to find. The assertions which Job makes evidently threaten the security of their implied confidence and full understanding of the problem which has arisen. The debate becomes more and more heated, which only goes to prove that the real concern of the friends was to alleviate the emotional shock and upset which they themselves had sustained, rather than to help Job in his troubles. For his part, Job speaks in a direct and vivid manner, but there is no direct arraignment of God, even when he is tempted to do so by his wife. In actual fact this standpoint is probably the crux of the entire position which we are studying.

At this juncture a new figure comes on the scene in the person of Elihu. He gives deference to the opinions of the three friends, but rebukes them for their shallowness and lack of feeling. He points out that afflictions are designed for the good of the sufferer, even though they may not be the direct result of transgression. Job is reproved for trying to justify himself rather than God, and the divine character is vindicated. In particular, Job is criticized for his lack of faith and inability to comprehend the nature of the spiritual forces at work in this situation. This is the essence of Elihu's discourse.

It is followed by a theophany, the judgment of Jehovah on the matter under consideration. Job is upbraided for his preoccupation with his own afflictions and his lack of appreciation of the greatness and magnificence of Jehovah by contrast with the insignificance of men. The comforters, too, come in for their share of criticism because they have exhibited shallowness of

thought on the one hand, and yet on the other they have been so presumptuous as to convey the impression that they had final and detailed knowledge concerning the deeper things of God and of human life.

Job acknowledges his shortcomings and intercedes for his friends, who are thereby themselves saved from punishment. It is clear that he has entered into a new and deeper spiritual relationship with God, manifesting itself in a more comprehensive vision of life. The book closes with a note concerning the restoration of the original state of prosperity, with further material blessings added.

From this outline of the contents it is possible for us to draw some inferences which are basic to a discussion of the problems involved. In the first place we must recognize that the book is not merely a tale of human fortitude under affliction, which is the most that some commentators have seen in it. The book in fact constitutes a theodicy, a justification of the ways of God with men. But if the Deity is taken as the dominating figure in the drama, the meaning tends to become obscured. It would appear that the book is more concerned with the intrinsic nature of man than in revealing the inner workings of the divine plan, which it is not usually given to man to know. It is enough for him that the sequences of life should help to shape a true, loyal and submissive spirituality. In short, suffering was shown to be a necessary factor in the development of spiritual maturity, and it has remained so to this day.

It is important for us to realize that the problem which the book presents is depicted as deep and profound, with an obvious element of the mysterious colouring the entire proceedings. For that reason, if for none other, it cannot be effectively dismissed by a smart answer or a knowing wink. It goes to the very bottom of the cauldron of strivings, conflicts and desires which have so profound a part to play in the expression of the human personality. The arguments of the three friends of Job are characteristic of the shallow thought of much contemporary spirituality, and inadequate for the very good reason that they are not based on a discernment of the force of the problem and its implications for humanity.

The basic teaching, then, is quite evident. The suffering inflicted upon Job was in no sense a punishment for sin. God is not whimsical, vindictive or capricious, but acts according to an ordered sequence. The effect of the suffering in this case was a

transformation of the entire mental outlook of Job, a new knowledge of God, a new perspective on life, influenced and directed by the realization of the insignificance of man as compared with the greatness and majesty of the Almighty. We might in fact say that the spiritual benefits which accrued to him were nothing less than a complete readjustment of his sense of eternal values, a conversion in the best sense, a profound deepening of his spiritual life.

One of the lessons which we learn from the Book of Job is startlingly modern in its implications. It is evident that there is practically no suffering which can be called exclusively physical, and similarly there is very little which can be designated as specifically mental or spiritual. We are living to-day in times which are witnessing the exodus of what had been called "machine-age medicine", in which the affected organ was treated, frequently without reference to the patient as a *person*, with the obvious tendency of isolating disorders with reference to a particular organ, and then applying either symptomatic treatment or radical surgical procedures, all of which carefully excluded the sense of "wholeness" or unity which the individual manifests in the ordinary way.

In place of this outmoded therapy we see the progress of the psychosomatic concept, the view that there is an intimate connection between emotional conflict and physical illness. Modern psychological and psychiatric investigation has revealed that there is a close link between emotional conflict or derangement and physical illness, and this discovery only serves to reinforce the conclusions reached long ago in Scripture that man is a *personality* rather than a mere body. It follows that when emotional conflicts exist within the personality, their expression is often in terms of what has been styled "organ language", that is to say, a particular organ begins to display indications of a pathological condition when at first no somatic pathology is present. Hence the psychogenic factor is a matter of immediate and pressing concern in the vast majority of illnesses, bringing the physical and mental aspects of the affliction into close association.

As a general rule, mental suffering results from the conflict of conscious and unconscious forces, and often this is heightened and brought into clear focus by the lack of integration or wholeness in the personality. It is a startling fact that many disease-syndromes have their genesis in part or in whole within

this lack of personal integration. Through organ-language the conflicts of the emotions and the personality may be consciously alleviated, though this development cannot be considered in any sense as an advance, since one form of bad health is merely replacing another one.

Space does not permit us to examine in detail at this point the significance of the above comments for the problem of suffering. Suffice it to say, however, that modern scientific investigation clearly supports the assertion that mental, emotional and often spiritual factors are frequently basic in disease. The clinical demonstration of the unconscious mind and its manifestations by Sigmund Freud has paved the way for extensions of scientific knowledge in this regard, and has thrown new light on the very problem with which we are concerned. The existence of conflict in the individual nature as described by modern investigators is very reminiscent of the Pauline introspection which confessed that "it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me . . . the good that I would I do not, but the evil which I would not, that I do" (Romans vii. 17 ff.). The conflict here could easily be interpreted as having physical manifestations.

It will be seen from the above that the manner in which spiritual and emotional elements were compounded in the suffering of Job has its counterpart in more recent times. Let us go a step further. The healing of the "disturbance" in the personality of Job and the creation of his new relationship to God, issuing in a more profound state of spiritual mastery, made the re-integration of his personality as a whole possible. Such a step is a necessary prerequisite for successful therapy of much of modern disease which is rooted in conflict and disturbance of the personality.

With this background we may attempt to examine the goal of our efforts with respect to this awesome problem of suffering. Here one must say immediately that such suggestions must be of a tentative nature, since we are very far from proper possession of even some of the facts, let alone of them all. A glib answer one way or the other satisfies neither the sufferer nor the one who is endeavouring to bring treatment to bear upon him, and the problem must be faced up to honestly and sincerely for the best results to be obtained. But if suffering has mental, emotional and spiritual implications along with the characteristic physical manifestations, and if the re-integration of the

personality is the most effective attack upon the problem, we must be careful to draw up the very best method or technique for this renewal of a consciousness of "wholeness".

In the case of Job, the re-integration took the form of an improvement in his relationships with God through his re-assimilation and consequent revision of the truths of the divine nature as experienced in relationship to the nature of man. This could never have been achieved through a sustained attempt to instruct the intellect alone, as is evident in the failure of his friends' logic to make the desired impress. For integration to be realized it was necessary for a total redirection of the personality to take place.

Surely this significant fact throws a good deal of light on our modern problem of suffering. Is it not just as true to-day as in the time of Job that this re-integration is necessary? Do not the people of our own day stand in desperate need of a consciously realized power and love which is able to cast out not merely fear—which plays a large part in all mental conflict—but also the repressions, maladjustments of personality, phobias and psychoses which are so common at the present? Though our answer to all these questions may well be an avowed affirmative, there must accompany it the realization that we are not thereby proposing any simple solution to the issue, nor are we by that means dissipating in any way whatever the force, depth and the unpredictable nature of suffering itself. The advantage of this standpoint is that we are presented with a pattern for our efforts at reaching the goal, and we have now arrived at the point where we may conveniently consider the techniques by which this re-integration may be best achieved.

Let us for the first time introduce into our discussion the term "maturity" as being for our purposes an improvement on the term "integration". Maturity, as we all recognize, refers to the ability of an individual to accept himself for what he is, in full recognition of his own limitations and deficiencies in various areas of life. In a spiritual sense it implies the possession of realistic goals for living, having regard to the fact that man is a child of God, and that the spiritual content of human nature posits a certain amount of reciprocity between man and God. There are a number of other commonly accepted criteria for maturity, but the above general delineation is adequate for the purposes of this paper.

Now in order to reach this stage of maturity, the experience of some pattern of suffering is generally necessary. The mental mechanisms of defence which we employ in painful or unpleasant situations must be exposed, and in order to do this some form of suffering, often physical as well as mental, is frequently necessary. Nor is this question of maturity merely personal in its implications. Because man is a social organism, it is necessary for the familial relationships to be examined carefully in order to avoid a lack of clarity between familial and divine allegiances.

On the alleviation of mental suffering, we may observe that the conflict which exists within the individual may be disentangled carefully by a skilled and sympathetic therapist, who will probably employ one or other of the modern counselling techniques to this end. But we must also remark that the very same result can be achieved by the spontaneous sympathy of a warm-hearted untrained friend. If the approach of the sufferer to God is to be mature, this type of thing is usually all that is necessary for a redirection of the personality, and its opening to the healing and consoling forces of God. The majority of ministers who undertake this latter rôle cannot claim such training as is the lot of the psychiatrist, nor indeed would such be desirable. What is important is the possession of a sympathetic appreciation of the situation, and of the issues involved in the individual personality alone, to say nothing of extraneous factors which are not infrequently concomitants of suffering.

The final consideration is that this maturity or integration must be achieved through a conscious deepening of the relationship with God, and at this point the therapeutic power of the Christian Gospel is very much in evidence. Integration other than on this basis is not really integration at all, and whilst the ills of the personality may be palliated by other means, it still remains true that the climax of maturity must come, as it did for Job, in the deepening of the spiritual life, for which the Gospel of the Risen Christ is the only specific. Upon this step the value and permanence of the whole sequence depends, and it is at this point that the minister can bring his own experience of Christ to bear upon the situation so that a realistic conversion results, thereby opening the way for progressive deepening of the spiritual life in "after-care". The act of faith or complete reliance upon God is the mark of integration, and prayer will also play a significant part in the entire process.

We have seen something of the vastness of the problem of suffering, the relation which the Book of Job has to it, and the manner in which the basic principles exemplified in that book may be related to modern knowledge and its more practical application to suffering. That this application is of special importance will probably be agreed by all, and it is certainly a challenge to the ministry of the Christian Church to perform more of those works without which its faith is dead.

R. K. HARRISON.

*Huron College,
London, Ontario.*