

Job, suffering in patience — Job 1-2, James 5:10-11



Georges de La Tour, Job speaking to his wife

James explains Job's bewildering experience to us, writing that he was an example of someone who endured suffering patiently. Christ also exemplified patient suffering, and so Job foreshadowed him. Scripture emphasizes that suffering can be God's loving discipline, or judgment for the unrepentant. But in Job we learn another meaning to suffering which is much closer to the suffering Christ experienced as the truly innocent one. God repeated twice that Job was a man of complete integrity who would have nothing to do with evil, and Job affirmed that his conscience was clear and he believed he was innocent and did not deserve the tragedies that befell him.

Christ was a victim of Satan's work, just as Job was. This is the first appearance in scripture of Satan, a name Christ used for his chief opponent. Job's reflections teach us that not all suffering can be explained as correction for sin. We are shown that God allows suffering and changes us through that suffering.

Knowing what deep pain there is in the death of a child, I cannot imagine Job's grief in losing all ten of his children at once in a tragic accident. Job's wife is often criticized for adding to his trials, but losing all your children so tragically and suddenly could drive any mother to madness. God apparently did not judge her as harshly as we do. There is no sign that Job got a new wife; she was there when their family was restored.

Job's responses to loss and illness are models of trust in God's sovereignty. He acknowledged that God gave and took away, but should still be praised. He exhorted his wife to accept both bad and good from God. And then he was silent, for his suffering was too great for words.

Job's story offers us practical wisdom to trust God and not blame him when we suffer. We can demonstrate that our faith is not based on receiving gifts from God, but is a love relationship with God himself. Despite all his depression and questioning, Job stayed oriented toward God and thus proved to Satan that Job's motives were right. Our difficulties offer us the same opportunity to pass difficult tests.

Do I see multiple possible explanations for different experiences of suffering in my own life?

Why Suffering? — Job 3-8, Matthew 16:24



Henry Ossawa Tanner, Job and his three friends

Job's dialogues and Christ's teachings make a similar point: suffering does not equal punishment. Reframing suffering was essential preparation for Christ, the innocent sufferer. To go from the covenant promise of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, to Christ's exhortation and example to take up our crosses, to Paul's extreme suffering for preaching, and to James' exhortation to see trials and temptations as an occasion for joy, something had to intervene. Job's story is that middle point.

Job knew he had been keeping the covenant to the best of his ability, so the intensity and breadth of his suffering made no sense to him. He knew his paradigm was shattered by his experience. What took its place was a persistent faith in God despite so many losses, the very thing Satan had challenged God and said would not happen.

The first two chapters are a prose prologue, and then chapters 3 to 42:6 are poetry. In the poetic debate the broken paradigm is presented by Job, with the friends insisting on the old one: God blesses obedience, and punishes disobedience. Job broke his silence, and a friend responded. After three cycles of Job countering his friends' arguments, Job summarized the debate, and a new figure, a young angry

friend, expressed exasperation with all of them. Then God himself spoke and Job responded. In a prose postscript, Job's fortunes were restored.

In these chapters Job expressed his despair, and Eliphaz encouraged him to present his case to God. Job protested that his guilt was being assumed, and simultaneously begged God for pardon. Bildad promised that he would be restored if he prayed and lived with integrity. It is important to remember that, wise as the friends sound, at the end of the book, God said he was angry with the friends for not speaking accurately about him as Job did.

That should put a stop to any simplistic interpretations of our own suffering or that of others. Scripture gives a complex picture of suffering as both deserved and undeserved, and God as both one who suffers with us and one who rescues us from suffering. Whatever the case, he offers us comfort in our suffering and we take what we have learned and comfort others.

Is there someone in my life to whom I can offer comfort in their suffering?

The Mediator — Job 9-11, Hebrews 9:15



Sieger Köder

Job asked God for a mediator to explain his suffering, but said there was no one. Christ came saying he was that representative that brought God and man into dialogue. Christ's answer included the fact that he came to share our suffering. Though Job thought there was no mediator who could bring man and God together as people do for their friends, he could not know that his question was preparing for the mediator.

We now know that the mediator who came fully understands human suffering, having endured discomfort, rejection, and physical torture. In part, the answer to Job's questions about suffering are that God in Christ suffers with us. There is no

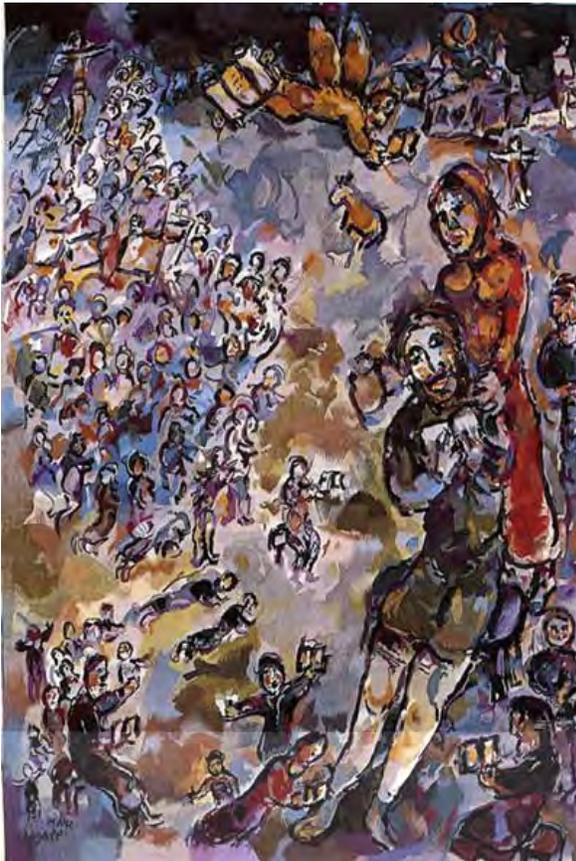
depth of our anguish that he does not understand. We also learn from Job and from Christ that the very act of suffering in faith can have a redemptive quality for other people. Job's misery has provided wisdom for millions over millennia.

In these three chapters, a form of the word "innocent" is repeated nine times out of its 23 occurrences in the book. Job asked how anyone can be declared innocent before God, and we now know that Christ is the answer to that question. His friend Zophar responded that Job was mocking God, should be ashamed, and was doubtless being punished less than he deserved.

Our sins are forgiven if we ask. Job seemed to sense that God's mercy was the answer, whereas the friends emphasized a transactional relationship where receiving blessing is conditional on doing the right thing. Sadly, this is an error we still fall into today, and even worse, sometimes offer opinions to a suffering friend that are more Zophar-like than Christ-like.

Am I humble and tenderhearted as I try to comfort others?

You are no better — Job 12-14, James 4:11



Marc Chagall, Chagall Tapestry

Job protested, twice saying that his friends were no better than he. Christ warned us not to condemn others, saying that the standard we use for others will be turned on us. If we think we can critique another, perhaps we need to look carefully at our own distortions, the log in our eye versus the speck we are removing from another.

The three friends said the wicked are punished with suffering, Job was suffering, therefore he must be wicked. He insisted this was not the case, that his friends were no different from him and were not suffering. He offered the famous evaluation that they were miserable comforters. He warned them that their judgmental attitude was dangerous, reminiscent of Christ's warning to stop judging others lest we be judged. Offering comfort out of our own experiences of suffering is better, rather than moralizing condemnation like Job's friends.

This seems to be one of the hardest lessons for us to learn. When I see the faults of others, I am enthusiastic about correcting them, but perhaps not quite so enthusiastic to have others correct my faults. This becomes particularly pernicious when we interpret difficulties in another's life as a sign of God's disfavor, just as Job's friends were doing to him. I repeatedly have to ask myself, "Am I being judgmental? Am I assuming I am better than this other person?"

Far better is tender empathy. Chagall designed a tapestry for the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, a center for the disabled. Toward the right, Job is barely standing, supported by his wife. To the left are small figures. Looking closely, one can see they are disabled people. The shape of the crowd is vaguely the figure of an evergreen tree, and on the top of the tree, almost like a star, is the figure of Christ crucified. On the back is the text: "For there is hope of a tree if it be cut down, that it will sprout again. And that the tender branch thereof will not cease." (Job 14:7)

We need to be people who offer the hope of new life for others, not judgment, no matter the difficulties of their situation. We need to encourage others that there is always the possibility of new growth.

Do I always include hope and restoration as part of my comfort?

August 27

The Resurrection — Job 15-19, John 11:25



Arcabas

A cryptic comment from Job foreshadows Christ's resurrection. Job wondered if mortals could live again. If so, this would give him hope in his struggle, making him wait eagerly for release. His second declaration was a clearer vision of Christ resurrected, saying he knew that his redeemer lived and would stand on the earth, thus becoming a prophet in the midst of his pain. He affirmed that he would see God in the body with his own eyes even after death.

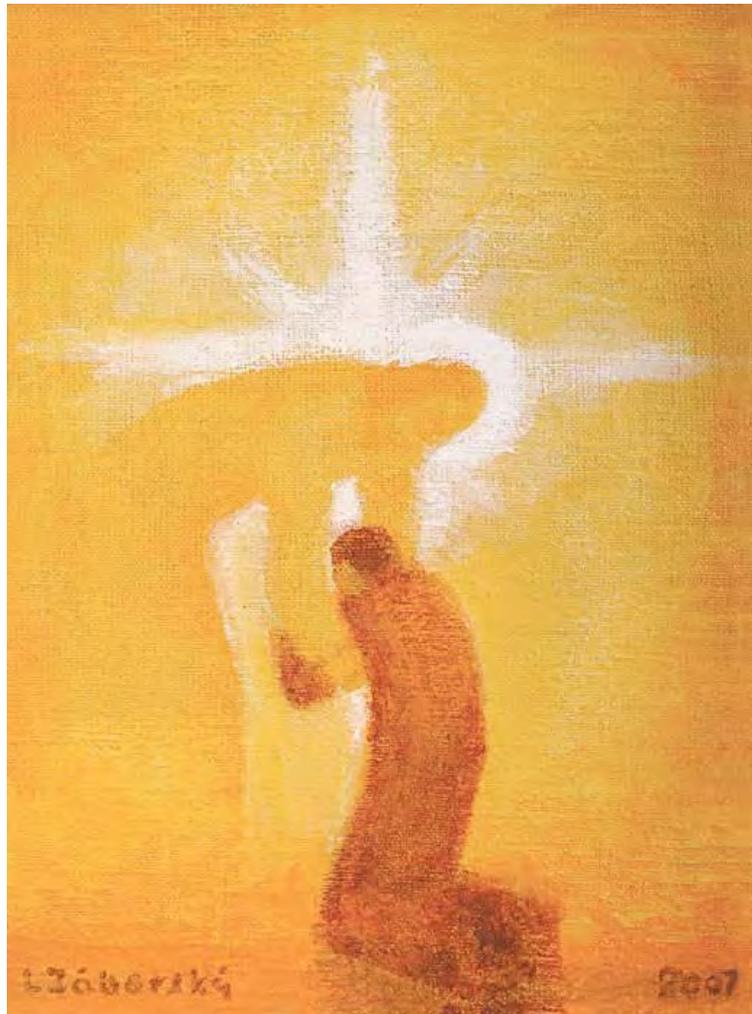
Before reaching this declaration, however, Job protested that his friends were torturing, breaking and insulting him, being harsh, and using his humiliation as evidence of sin. He protested against God as well: God had wronged him, blocked his way, plunged him in darkness, stripped him of honor, demolished him, destroyed his hope, and considered him an enemy.

This is the cry of anyone who has seen their child suffer, or experienced a tragedy. For anyone in despair over their relationship with God, I think back to similar moments in my life when I have felt that God let me down. I try to remember how I felt, and use that memory to be understanding, and empathetic.

Extreme pain cannot go on forever, and the hope of resurrection gives us strength to face our struggles. Paul reminded us that our current troubles are relatively small and short-lived, no matter what they are, and he encouraged us to look ahead to the great and everlasting glory that is coming.

When in my life have I felt that God has let me down?

Pure Gold — Job 20-25, James 1:2-4



Ladislav Záborsky

We know that Christ's suffering is the model the New Testament calls us to follow. We are promised we will share his glory if we share his suffering. Job's experience foreshadowed the benefits of suffering we see in Christ. James explains that we should suffer cheerfully, knowing it will bring about faith and perseverance.

Over the course of the debate, Job arrived at a view of suffering that fit well with the backstory he knew nothing about. He said, “But he knows where I am going. And when he tests me, I will come out as pure as gold.” (Job 23:10) In the prologue, we know that his suffering was set up as a test of loyalty to God, and Job was purified as he went through this suffering. The trying of our faith results in pure gold, something beautiful for God and frustrating for Satan.

To follow God with our whole heart, loving and serving him to the very best of our ability, we need a theology of suffering that helps us. Accepting suffering as God’s way of purifying our faith can be the theology that gives us strength to bear it gracefully. We easily fall into Job’s theological error, and a clash between our theology and experience causes agony. He had not lost his faith, but was confused, wondering why God did not speak to him and tell him what he had done wrong.

In 22:21 Eliphaz gave Job the commendable advice to stop quarreling with God and offered a list of positive things that would come from this, including peace and being able to intercede for others. In fact, by the end of the book when God speaks to Job, he does stop his quarrel and does receive peace. But in a delightful irony, Eliphaz is one for whom Job has to intercede since God is angry over what he and his friends had to say. Part of the problem with this good advice is that it came in the context of accusing and judging Job. Eliphaz forgot that the greatest commandment is love.

My sister Beverly taught me the lessons of Job. She went into a coma when she was 18, and though it took several months, she was healed completely, an example of God’s rescue. At 36 she was diagnosed with cancer, and lived bravely through the challenges and reprieves for 14 years after a diagnosis, celebrating God’s presence with her in victories and defeats. During the terrible physical suffering of her last year of life, she showed pure love and faith, writing her wisdom for her children, making baby blankets for grandchildren she would never see, and walking for the cure for cancer. She showed us how to suffer well. She did not give up her fight for health, she celebrated and enjoyed the good years of health won, she did not blame God, she sought to love those around her, and yet she accepted her moment of defeat with grace and the hope of resurrection. She endured, and became perfect and complete.

Who in my life is a model of how to suffer well?

The wisdom of the cross — Job 26-31, I Corinthians 1:18-30



Sieger Köder, The Folly of God

In Job's final speech, he asked where to find wisdom and affirmed that God knows where it is. He said, perhaps prophetically, that death and destruction had heard rumors of wisdom. We know from the New Testament that the ultimate expression of God's wisdom is Christ, and the ultimate wisdom about suffering is Christ's death on the the cross.

Job's thoughts show ongoing turmoil in his final speech. He affirmed that he had a clear conscience, had faith in God's power, and celebrated God's wisdom. He not only reviewed his past blessings, but he expressed his present anguish as well. He examined his past behavior trying to see where he had done well or poorly, but he still wondered why he was suffering.

Job and his wife were still grieving the unaccountable, sudden deaths of their ten children, not to mention their financial losses, and his illness. While purification and endurance provide theology to encourage a believer, this does not answer agonizing questions about sudden accidents and death. It is not hard to make a litany of innocent sufferers: victims of genocide, children emaciated from cholera, a child with cancer, a teen struggling with mental illness, a family going through a divorce, a person struggling with an addiction, chronic pain, tragic accidents, refugees fleeing a disintegrating city, a rejected minority group, and so many more things. In quantity and quality, it is too much, and I am overwhelmed.

We need wisdom to face these difficult things. Christ's crucifixion shows us that God suffers with us, bearing the worst that humanity does. His presence in and with those who suffer may be our deepest comfort. I do not have the strength to suffer with all who suffer, but he does. Christ's passion gives us true wisdom regarding suffering as we repeatedly meditate on each detail.

Can I truly put those who suffer into God's hands and not try to bear their burdens on my own?

The Suffering Christ — Job 32-37, Matthew 25:31-46



Vincent van Gogh, Pietà

Christ taught us that he is present in the one who is suffering, and so by definition Job foreshadows Christ. He said that he is present in the one who suffers and those

who alleviate suffering in any way have the privilege of serving him. But Job's friends did not have this important insight, and instead of treating him with reverence, they were critical, and then contemptuous, and finally stopped talking to him altogether. The deteriorating relationship between Job and his friends reached a climax at the start of these chapters.

A younger man who had been listening, Elihu, expressed anger at Job's insistence on his innocence and anger at the ineffectual arguments of the friends. Like many younger people, he expected more of the adults and felt let down. Much of what he said is quite true. He argued that because of God's greatness, we cannot accuse him. He said God speaks to us, gives a ransom for our lives, does not twist justice, will bring justice if we wait, he hears the cries of the needy, and he gets our attention through adversity. Elihu pointed out the miracles of nature as showing God's power.

These are all true things, yet something was wrong in Elihu's attitude. He was angry and judgmental, accusing Job of arrogance, rebellion, blasphemy and speaking like a fool. Elihu is a clear example of offering good answers in a harmful way. Elihu concluded that those who are truly wise show reverence to God. What he did not grasp is that the truly wise also see God in their suffering friend and show them reverence. We can avoid his error if we see the one suffering as Christ himself, and humbly, respectfully, reverently respond to them.

Job proved, even in his frustration and questioning, that his fundamental motivation was not to receive blessings, but was having an intimate, communicating, relationship with God. He had passed the test and shown that Satan's accusations were false. His love for God was real. May we be able to do the same. When we have suffered, our brokenness becomes like Christ's broken body. Our brokenness becomes bread to feed and nourish others.

Do I see Christ's presence in those who suffer?

The Glory of Creation — Job 38-41, Colossians 1:15-16



Sandipa

Christ, the one through whom God created, is before and above creation. Ultimately, he, supreme over all creation, will come and respond to Job's questions by sharing our suffering. Here God celebrates mysteries of creation as his response to Job. As an answer to "why am I suffering?" it is entirely beside the point. Instead, it is a glorious poem to the incredible complexity of the world we live in.

Yet in some mysterious way it answers the questions. At a point when I was discouraged, I had a dream of many beautiful things in the natural world. It filled me with awe and happiness and when I woke up I was still amazed and cheerful. I thought to myself, "I have been given the same answer to suffering as Job. The world is so full of the astonishing works of the Creator that my inability to understand suffering is eclipsed." It did not resolve the problems, but it served as a touchstone to which I returned.

God's challenge is for us to interact with creation as a way of knowing him. God asked many questions which can be summarized by one: "Do you know the laws of the universe and how God rules the earth?" To date, no matter what we learn there is always more to explore. We do not understand the mysteries of creation, incarnation and resurrection.

Today we are privileged to enjoy the work of documentary filmmakers and nature photographers who seek out beautiful, strange, compelling, and unknown things in our world. We enjoy seeing things no one could have seen in the past. Today cutting-edge questions include particle physics, black holes, dark matter, the expanding universe, how our brains work, creatures deep in the sea and many other things that awaken wonder as we explore the questions. Neither the questions nor the glory have ended.

There is a subtext, however. Nature, so full of beauty, complexity, power and life, is made and managed by God. If that is so, is it not logical that he can intervene in my much smaller crisis? The ultimate intervention after Christ's suffering was the resurrection. It is the primary reason to believe God has the power to transform suffering.

Do I see God's great power in creation? Does this encourage me that he has power to work in my life?

Job's Happy Ending — Job 42, John 16:22



Laurent de Le Hyre, Job restored to prosperity

Job repented, the same repentance Christ required for entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven. The book reaches its climax as Job acknowledges that he has seen God. This is the reward of the pure in heart. He took back everything he had said, and was full of repentance. He recognized his arrogance in feeling he could judge God.

Job's friends who thought all suffering could be explained as punishing sin were wrong also, and Job served as their priest to obtain forgiveness. Job did not get his children back, but he was given new children and lived to see four generations. The last line of the book says he died an old man who had a long and good life.

Thomas Merton wrote wisely: "The terrible 'problem of suffering' is regarded by the Bible not so much as a problem to be explained or as a mystery to be contemplated, but as an inscrutable existential fact. The one book that deals most explicitly with suffering as 'problem' ironically derides the answers of the wise men who come to

comfort Job, the actual sufferer. In the end, God himself speaks, and instead of resolving the problem and answering the question, simply states forcefully that there is really no answer to suffering regarded as a problem. He says equivalently that man himself is the problem, and also that God is somehow central to the fact that man is man's own problem. But nothing further is explained—least of all by Job's 'happy ending.'”

Suffering is never fully explained, because it repeatedly touches our lives. But blessings returned for Job, and he lived once more in the joy, peace, and power of new life. If he foreshadowed Christ in his suffering, the ending foreshadows resurrection and ascension, and our lives have those times as well.

When in my life have I seen crucifixion turn to resurrection?