



In the Face of Innocent Suffering: Learning to Allow Rage

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We know that pain and suffering are a part of life. We can prevent and alleviate some suffering some of the time, but suffering will never be completely eradicated from this world. Nevertheless, we continue to live our lives, perhaps praying to God for comfort or strength in times of trial, but generally believing that the good ultimately outweighs the bad or that setbacks can be opportunities for growth. I remember challenging my students in a philosophy of religion course to discuss the problem of suffering. Most of the answers I received were attempts to find some logic to suffering or something positive that could come out of the experience of suffering. But what about those situations where the magnitude of suffering—in particular, innocent suffering—is beyond all comprehension? How do we respond ethically and theologically to the tragedy caused by last spring’s earthquake and tsunami in Japan? What can we say to parents mourning the death of an infant child? What good is our faith when we have been told that a spouse has terminal cancer and less than one year to live? How can a God who is all powerful and all good permit such injustices?

This is the central question asked by the book of Job. Most people think of the book as the story of a righteous man who held fast to his faith when tested by Satan, one who refused to curse God despite losing not only his possessions but also his children. This impression is the result of the narrative framework of the book—its first two chapters as well as half of its final chapter—which many (if not most) scholars agree was not originally part of the book. Ironically, the central chapters—the poetic discourses on suffering—are aimed quite explicitly against any simplistic attempts at explaining the problem of evil. Job’s friends who have come to comfort him try to convince him that there must be some reason why all these tragedies have come over him. Surely, he must have committed some sin, perhaps unknowingly, for which he is now punished. Yet Job maintains his innocence. He does not curse God, but he challenges God to respond to his cries for justice. Job wants an answer. He is willing to accept his fate, but he wants to know why he is suffering. The language used by Job in his challenge to God employs legal idioms and imagery. Job is, in effect, taking God to court. God’s response “out of the whirlwind” is a

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counterchallenge to Job. God will explain the reason for Job's suffering, but only if Job can assume God's position as the creator and sustainer of all things. Recognizing his limitations, Job humbly submits to God's sovereignty.

At first, this resolution may seem unsatisfying. Job's desire to understand the reason for his affliction hardly seems unreasonable. Can the message of the book really be only an affirmation of the need for human beings to submit to God's supremacy? Should we simply accept the tsunami deaths because it is not for us to know why the innocent suffer and die? The book of Job is more complex than that.

There are three ideas I find striking about the book. First, in the book, Job does not renounce or abandon God but challenges God. In doing so he does not sever but rather intensifies his relation to God. Second, Job maintains his innocence to the end. He does not resign himself to an unjust fate, but demands justification. Third, even though God's response silences Job, God is not angry at Job but rather at Job's friends, "for [they] have not spoken the truth about [God] as did [God's] servant Job" (42:7 NJPS). God even instructs them to ask Job to pray for them and offer sacrifices on their behalf. Job's challenge is seen as more righteous than the pious attempts at finding fault as an explanation of suffering.

So how can the book of Job inform our ethical and theological response to suffering? For one thing, the book gives voice to the victim of suffering, a voice that refuses to be silenced. I am reminded here of the words of Dylan Thomas in a poem written for his dying father: "Do not go gentle into that good night...rage, rage against the dying of the light." Rage can be a more appropriate response to innocent suffering than silent acceptance. Perhaps even more important is the vindication of Job over against his friends. It is not Job's challenge of God that is deemed blasphemous, but the friends' attempt to find reason in innocent suffering. Would a complete biological, theological, ethical explanation of a cancer death truly satisfy a widowed spouse? Would it not rather "add insult to injury"? Innocent suffering is and must be a challenge to us and to God. It may not be a challenge to which we will ever receive a satisfactory answer, but it is a challenge that must never be ignored, and the voice of the victim must be heard—by us and by God. ⊕

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In the Face of Innocent Suffering: Learning to See Grace

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I'm troubled by the ending of the book of Job. It's nice that God restores Job's fortunes, even giving double what Job had prior to his afflictions. Job's sisters and brothers and neighbors gather around him, bringing gifts to celebrate his restoration. Job lives a long life, blessed more richly than in his former days. He even receives seven sons and three daughters, just like he had before.

What troubles me is that the sons and daughters Job receives are not "just like he had before." They are not the same people; those particular sons and daughters remain lost to Job. The text does make the replacement children look a lot better than the originals. We know little about Job's first children, except that they enjoyed a good party, apparently every day. Instead of getting up early to make sacrifices to the Lord, Job's first children partied late and left it to Job to sacrifice for them. Apparently they weren't much help with Job's fields and cattle. And they certainly weren't getting themselves married and producing grandchildren. But Job's new children, the "replacements," were worth bragging about! No women were as fair as Job's new daughters. We even know their names: "Dove," "Cassia" (a fragrant herb), and "Horn of Adornment." And the sons! They produced sons, who produced sons, who produced sons. Job lived to see four generations of sons born to his name. The beauty of Job's daughters and the richness of his sons' progeny were much greater, the text seems to hint, than anything that those other children would have given him.

Yet, even if Job's first children would have caused Job countless pains for the rest of his life, it seems that their absence would cause greater pain. Job didn't lose just *any* sons and daughters; he lost *these* sons and *these* daughters. He lost the particular people they were, and he will never know the particular people they would have been. One child does not, cannot, replace another. Job's restoration seems incomplete to me. No matter how great Job's love for his second set of children, there must have remained ten absences, ten holes, in his heart.

I have not suffered the loss of a child, and I can only imagine the soul-splitting grief of those who have. But I do know well, as we all do, the loss of what might have been; indeed, what—from our perspective—*should* have been. The grief over

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such loss is profound, so much so that often we—like Job—come to doubt the worth and meaning of our own existence. We may fight mightily to hold onto what we think our life was meant to be, even though such a fight only saps us of the capacity to find joy in our new life. In the midst of our grief we may feel betrayed and abandoned by God, and we may even curse God for apparently robbing us of what was meant to be ours.

I don't think there is an adequate explanation for suffering, including the suffering of loss; I don't think any explanation could be adequate to the depth and variety of pain that human beings experience. And I also know that there are some wounds that will never fully heal. Some experiences can shatter a soul, and the aftershocks of that shattering can reverberate throughout a lifetime. But I do believe that in the midst of loss God speaks to us—not out of a whirlwind, perhaps; rather God whispers to us of graces we never considered. For this, I turn from Job to Julian.

Julian of Norwich was a fourteenth-century anchoress (one who withdrew from secular society) who, in the midst of a life-threatening illness, received sixteen “showings,” or visions, of Christ. One truth that she learns from these showings is that human beings are “blinded in this life,”¹ that our vision is so veiled by fear, grief, and shame that we cannot see reality. That is, one “neither sees clearly his loving lord, who is so meek and mild to him, nor does he truly see what he himself is in the sight of his loving lord.”² For Julian, the grace of God is glittering everywhere around us. God so deeply longs for us to lift our heads and see God's grace that God sits with us, sorrowing with us and receiving our fear, grief, and shame, until we are able to look around and see the grace that glistens even where we thought all was darkness. There are pockets of grace in each possibility that we encounter, even after the loss of what we thought would always be. One possibility may now be closed, but God's grace is waiting to be found around other corners, even when we think we'll never know joy again.

What we lose may very well be gone forever. What we receive instead doesn't make up for the loss, but it does come as a surprising and welcome grace, where before we had only seen hopelessness. That in itself may be gift enough to light the way into new life. ⊕

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¹Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (New York: Paulist, 1978) 272.

²*Ibid.*, 270–271.