

## THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

by Lester J. Start

January 20, 1980

First Baptist, Kalamazoo

As Illumined by the Book of Job

The examination of this great problem of human suffering discussed in the book of Job is not a matter of mere academic curiosity on my part. I have faced the issues raised not with the detached, objective viewpoint of the philosopher, but from a sense of deep need. I needed desperately some answer to this problem, because it lies on my heart at all times, for every weekend when I visit my home before going to my church I see the problem tragically in my mother, who is suffering from a painful and incurable disease. And so I have needed an answer to give her some sort of assurance that God has not deserted her, and to quiet the fearful doubts which inevitably arise in one's heart, when he sees a good and righteous person whom he loves suffering for something he cannot understand. I am thankful to be able to report that I have found answers which have quieted my doubts, but, more important, which have helped tremendously the peace of mind of the sufferer as the various thoughts were passed on from week to week. If I have not contributed to the class discussions, it is not because of lack of interest or dearth of ideas, but because the problem was too close to discuss publicly. I shall attempt to make up for this now. . .

The first suggestion that the book of Job offers as an answer to the problem of suffering is that suffering is a test of character. In the throne room of heaven, as described in the prologue to the book, Satan, the "policeman" of God, intimates that Job is righteous only because he is enjoying happiness and prosperity and that he would soon curse God if he had to face hardship and suffering. And so God gives the Satan permission to test Job by taking away his property and his family, but Job passes these tests with flying colors. Then Job is inflicted with a plague of boils, and begins his great struggle with doubt as his suffering increases.

As we examine real-life situations, we see that suffering may very well be a test of character. So often it is the person who has endured physical suffering and disappointment who develops the radiant and godlike character. As suffering forces man to seek elsewhere for the satisfactions and props which men generally find in material pleasures and satisfactions, he develops a reliance upon spiritual values, and thus finds a different kind of strength. Suffering, then, is likely to bring man closer to God by forcing him to seek the spiritual values from God; it is much harder to come close to God, when all that man sees is material benefits which may not have any relation to God in his own mind. The temper of the modern mind all too frequently suffers from this spiritual myopia, as it concerns itself with the material things. The present world crisis is serving a good purpose in awakening men to the need of re-seeking these deeper values, and thus tests the character of modern man by forcing him to overcome his weaknesses, as it shows where his shortcomings lie. It is interesting to note that the Christian spirit has proven its character most effectively during the long course of the centuries in times of hardship and persecution. The Quakers showed their strongest character when they had to struggle against suffering and persecution, but after they became settled and prosperous in Pennsylvania, and everything was

going their way, they lost their original character as they depended more and more upon their own power.

If we look to modern psychology for vindication of this point, we see in the idea of conflict as growth a support. According to this idea organisms develop strength only as they face and overcome obstacles in their lives. The athlete develops muscles by lifting weights; the fox develops cunning by his experience with traps; and man develops spiritual strength only by going through the crucible of suffering and disappointment.

If we look at the picture from the opposite point of view, and consider what life would be like if there were no hardships or suffering in it, we must recognize that suffering fills a needed place in life. A life of unadulterated bliss is likely to lead to a degenerate life of slothful ease or selfishness, for then there is no reason for the individual to struggle. The world is full of such parasitic creatures on the vital organs of society. A further important point which should be noted is that it is the man who drinks deeply of the bitter as well as the sweet in life who develops the compassionate and understanding attitude toward his fellow men. The man who has never suffered starvation or endured the agonies of poverty and disease is not so likely to develop a missionary desire to rid the world of these evils, as the man who has suffered a while as he lives. Thus, whether we think of the individual or the group we see that suffering is a test of character; it shows up the weak points, and provides the sting needed to spur men on to improve their weaknesses.

It must be recognized, however, that this cannot be considered a complete answer to the problem. All too often suffering of this sort can defeat its purpose, for, as in the case of Job, the sufferer may endure long and come to the point where the suffering is too great to bear. A little suffering serves admirably to test and strengthen character, but a tremendous load may bend the stoutest spirit, just as a good horse's spirit may be broken when it is forced to draw a load too heavy for him. In such cases the sufferer may go down in defeat, unless there are further answers to help him.

This is the difficulty I met at home. My mother already had this idea, for she has previously found ultimate value in distressing experiences. But this particular suffering is so intense and has been going on for so long, that she cannot see how it could possibly still be a question of testing. There comes a time when the human spirit is no longer stout enough after prolonged suffering to face it as a challenge and test. Then it is necessary to point out that God is doing more than showing His faith in man by testing him; He is with the sufferer in his suffering, giving him the strength that is greater than the suffering he has to bear. Thus the idea of suffering as a test of character may backfire and be a curse instead of a comfort, for God will then appear to the sufferer, (as to Job), as a ruthless ruler torturing his children in a cruel manner by asking them to bear more than they can. This answer, then, is only partially satisfactory; it is true in the sense that if there were no obstacles there could be no achievements which spell happiness, but it is unsatisfactory when applied to an individual called upon to do more than he has the strength to do. Such suffering is all the more pitiful, when the sufferer realizes this possible intent and struggles to overcome his trouble only to find himself beating his fist against an unyielding stone.

The second intimation of the reason for suffering is stoutly maintained by Job's three friends, who hold the orthodox idea that all suffering is the result of sin. This idea so strongly held by the Hebrew is still perhaps the best single explanation of the cause of suffering. As we look about us in individual lives and society, we see people suffering because of their own or others' sins. Sin may be defined for the purposes of the discussion as "violation, either deliberate or unwitting, of the genetic and constructive, and cooperative processes of God, which may be discovered in the laws of nature, in the experience of society, and the revealed will of God."<sup>1</sup> If the world could get rid of its sin, it is certain that it would be a pretty good place in which to live - we would have little cause to complain for most of our suffering, would then disappear. The sins of selfishness, greed, hatred, envy, jealousy, impelling men to seek their own interests, result in the poverty, exploitation, wars, and misery of the world. If this were not the case, if sin were not the cause of most suffering, if not all of it, there would be little point in the religious leader=s and educator=s attempts to improve the moral tone of society. It is this sin which most of us properly recognize as the cause of suffering in the world, and we do right in striving to overcome it.

There are four kinds of sin, if we distinguish between individual and group sin and between intentional and unintentional sin, and all four of them are vicious and lead to suffering. Sometimes the individual must some suffer for a group sin for which he is responsible only very indirectly, or perhaps not at all. Wars and plagues bring suffering sometimes to the very individuals who are least responsible. Quite often in this way the group morality conflicts with the individual, so that however a person acts he conflicts with one standard or the other and is guilty of sin no matter what he does. This leads to the question of what standard is ultimate; but, however we decide for ourselves, the fact remains that we individually cannot decide the issue, for there is always some contradictory criterion, and so long as there is conflict, there will be suffering. Sin seems to be not only the violation of the will of God but also what we understand to be the will of God. Thus it is possible for a person to act according to the will of God and still be guilty of sin according to another standard which another takes to be the will of God. The conflict is not irreconcilable, however. The worst conflict, that between group and individual morality, seems to be the result of a steady secularization of group life beginning with the period of the Enlightenment. If only individuals would make the impact of their morality felt in secular affairs, the tone of the group morality would tend to conform.

The ultimate standard is from God, and it is learned only through a progressive awareness of the laws of God. As we learn the laws of nature we recognize that conflict with them leads to suffering. It is a similar experience in learning the moral laws governing men; as we violate them, we suffer, and through suffering we learn what it is that is required of us.

If we understand sin in the broad sense, it would seem that almost all of our suffering is the result of sin, but there are cases where there seems to be no moral implications involved. It is possible, I suppose, to make a strong case for the position of the three friends, to insist that all suffering is the result of sin. Moralists in times past (and even today) have explained natural catastrophes as the punishment of God inflicted upon the suffering people because of their sins.

I found this point of view deeply entrenched in my mother's attitude toward her own suffering. She often would torture herself with the idea that she was suffering for some past sin, and the

trouble was only aggravated when she could not find such a cause. To get away from this idea entirely was perhaps the most difficult task in order to prepare for a deeper understanding of the cause of suffering.

When a tornado strikes a town killing and wounding its people, when a piece of stone falls from the facade of a building and kills a passerby (as it happened in New York City, a few weeks ago) it is difficult to understand how the sufferer is being punished for sin, because there seems absolutely no connection. When a virulent disease attacks indiscriminately good people as well as bad, one cannot see how moral implications are involved. There seem to be cases, then, when sin is not the cause of suffering, but these cases are probably not so many as we think. If we consider that the individual as a part of the group partakes of the bad features as well as the good of that society, if we consider that he shares in the benefits and virtues and also in the sins of the group, we will see that we can find moral implications which were not at first apparent. For example, the good man today is suffering because of the war not because he individually has sinned, but because society in general has sinned, and he as a part of that society must share in the suffering just as he shares in the privileges and benefits of society which are not of his making. The curse of disease epidemics quite often is caused by social sins as when society allows unsanitary housing, undernourishment, and unhealthy labor conditions. Even violent acts of nature may often be understood in this light; for example, the dust storms in the Midwest were caused by man's exploitation of the soil. Certainly sin is involved in some manner in most cases of suffering even when it is not at once apparent. If we examine all of the various implications in Job as to the cause of suffering, we find that they could be fitted into this one general cause of sin, except for this one implication which suggests that sometimes sin is not involved. Suffering as a test of character points to shortcomings which may imply sin; lack of human sympathy is certainly a sin; warning implies something violating God's will; mystery may point to violations as yet not understood; suffering as revelation of God would not contradict sin as cause either, for it may be a part of God's revelation. The objection to this possible theory that sin is responsible for all sin {suffering} is the statement that Job is a perfect man. This objection might be countered by the thesis that perfection is a sin, that no man can be perfect in the face of God, and human perfection leads man to think himself equal with God (which was ultimately Job's sin).

This theory is thrown out, not in the spirit of argumentation for its own sake, but because of a certain suspicion that the writer may be pointing to a further implication or problem, the problem of the righteous man, who knows he is righteous. The writer clearly indicates his disapproval of the righteousness of Job's friends, but it is hinted that Job may not have been unlike them before his experience of suffering. It is hard to support this, but I feel that Job's protestations of his innocence, and the accounts of his virtue in the prologue, may indicate the writer's view in this way: "here is a man who thinks he is perfect, as if any man could be." The fact that God humbles him so completely would seem to bear out the point also.

This idea has occurred to me as I see that those people who appear most righteous think themselves least worthy. The greatest spirits suffer the most because of their feelings of imperfection before a God who is so good in their mind's eye that they feel far below the ideal of perfection. The idea was further brought home to me in seeing people who think that because they are righteous they have power with God, and instinctively feel that they must not be called

upon to suffer. I find this attitude particularly among religious perfectionists and Christian Scientists who feel a unique gnosis which should protect them from suffering. And I have found the same attitude in my mother, who has felt that virtue must mean reward. And when I see how her suffering is bringing her closer to dependence upon God instead of self-righteousness as an armor against evil, I feel that this deeper meaning of the cause of suffering may be in the mind of the writer of Job.<sup>2</sup> But this idea is by no means settled in my own mind; I merely submit it as a possible consideration.

Lack of human sympathy is a particular sin which perhaps causes more havoc than any other. It was the harsh, uncompromising attitude of Job's friends which broke his spirit. It is the harshness and lack of understanding and indifference of our dearest friends which is always the hardest yoke to bear. We do not mind suffering so much when a kindly hand or sympathetic eye gives us encouragement, but when we see only cold indifference or an attitude of unsympathetic judgment we cannot go on. When a friend says, "I cannot help you but wish I could," and genuinely extends sympathy we find he has helped. Jesus' emphasis upon love as the heart of the law bears out the importance of love as the balm on the hurts of life, and conversely points to the cruelty of its absence.

I have had this poignantly and tragically illustrated to me at home. My mother will bear patiently her suffering for days, but sometimes when we have neglected her, leaving her alone in her pain, forgetting to give the encouragement and sympathy which helps so much to ease the pain, I have found her quietly weeping alone, and I am sick at heart at what I have done.

Suffering is a warning to man against those things which are harmful to him, including his sins. If it were not for the toothache we would not care for our teeth; if burns did not hurt, we would destroy our tissues by handling hot things. If we did not feel suffering as a result of our sins, we would not be so interested in leading the moral life. Suffering is the warning which teaches us how to use the many things which God has given us for the right purpose. Suffering in the group is a warning against evil social conditions which must be changed.

Sometimes this type of suffering seems harsh, but it is the way we learn. And if experience seems to slap us cruelly in the process of learning, it also helps us to see what is right by encouraging us so that we know the good life is good for us. The bruises on a child's knees warn him that he must watch carefully how he steps; they point to his faults, but they indicate also how he should use his feet to learn to walk. It is harder to learn the more stately and noble kind of walking, walking with God, and we receive many bruises by our suffering because we are not stepping correctly, but in the process we will learn to walk, for there is a hand which helps us to our feet again when we stumble.

A further implication is that suffering is a mystery, that there is no answer to its cause. This is the conclusion which most commentaries arrive at after studying the book of Job. In the sense that all the deeper meanings are hid in God, this is true. We cannot plumb the depths of the problem, for when we do so we find ourselves reaching out by faith to God. (And this sort of conclusion doesn't fit in a scholarly commentary.) Often we badger ourselves with individual problems of suffering, forgetting that from the wider vision of God the picture is different. We find it a

mystery, why suffering exists, while there very likely is a deep purpose and meaning that only the infinite view can see, - just as a tiny spot on an aerial photograph means nothing to us until we see a larger area of the picture.

We are impressed (as was Schopenhauer when watching a cat eat a mouse) by the large amount of suffering in the natural world. The law of the jungle seems to be the guiding spirit of life, and mother nature often seems a cruel stepmother. But if we consider the wider view we see that death is a necessity, and that the suffering in the animal world which precedes death may be exaggerated. Perhaps the mouse does not suffer so much as we think; Livingstone describes a "feeling of delicious inertia and no pain at all@ when being mauled by a lion. The smaller dissonant notes in nature are mysteries in themselves, just as the individual discords in a symphony are meaningless, but they all fit in together with euphonious chords to make a sublime symphony whose grandeur is accentuated by the occasional cacophony.

We must ever remember that there is a problem of good as well as of evil; if it is hard to explain the causes of suffering, it would be just as hard philosophically to explain happiness. Ultimately the final meanings but lead to God.

Is life worth living with suffering in it? The answer in Job and in the lives of countless men who have endured great suffering is an emphatic affirmative. Life is its own validation. Even with the suffering it is good. When we see that suffering is an aid to development, when we see that it is the method by which man progresses toward God, we see that life is good because even with the suffering it is tied up with God.

It is true that many a skeptic who defines values in terms of pleasures (refined though they may be), finds this conclusion hard to accept. If surcease from suffering is the goal of life, then life with suffering in it is thereby invalidated. Aristotle defined happiness as the goal of life; but he defined happiness as  $\text{gh}^*V4:@<\backslash V \text{ not } Z^* @<Z$ . And eudaimonia implies a serenity of mind which further implies the pacification of discordant notes, held in check by a higher vision. This is the kind of life we think of when we say that a life with suffering in it is good. It is the kind of life we see in men who have faced the sufferings in life and come through them, refined by the fires, as gold; it is the life expressed by the radiance of a sufferer who has had to seek deeply for his strength, and found the more abundant life. It is a life in contrast to that of the sophisticated hedonist who finds eternity his enemy, the soft, parasitic life of the spiritual weakling, who must still wean himself on milksop.

But if we are to say that life with suffering in it is still good, we must base our conviction on spiritual values which rest upon faith. It must be seen in its deeper meaning as the revelation of God. This is hard for the person who has not suffered to believe, but he who has been through the fires, or watched while someone dear to him has experienced the agonies of suffering, will realize this. It is true that many go down in defeat, crushed by the weight of pain. But there is that which is within man which is from God, that will lift this weight and allow the spirit beneath to stretch up to a taller stature than ever before. I have watched this struggle of an indomitable spirit against an overpowering weight of pain in my mother's suffering. There have been times when the spirit seemed crushed, or wounded mortally unto despair, but more and more it finds its

strength in a closer walk with God. The times when my mother felt deserted by God have passed; now she feels Him closer than ever, and in spite of the pain, feels a deeper reality of serenity reached by the groping hand which has found a friend by the “nevertheless of faith.

This Job has taught us both and we are grateful to him for explaining the great redemptive work of Jesus, whose Spirit makes this answer to suffering true. With His help, suffering must lead to a deeper revelation of God, the revelation of the God who never deserts his children, but enters their lives and their sufferings, and shows them life is good because it is of God.

P.S.

A further implication which is only slightly indicated in Job as to the cause of suffering, is that fear helps to bring it on. Job says, “that which I feared has come upon me.” It is certainly true that fear is one of the worst enemies of faith. If a sufferer lets fear rule him, destroying the serenity of mind which comes from faith, the suffering is only intensified. Thus while fear may not initiate suffering always, it increases its weight.

1 Definition drawn from seminar discussion.

2 Query: was the time of the writing of Job an era of religious perfectionism?