

PRAYER: DOES IT MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE

November 9, 2025
Library Bible Study

Disappointment with God-He Allows Evil

- The fall of humankind – 1
- The renewal of the world – 2
- Job is right and we are in the wrong.

Why do you hide your face
and consider me your enemy?
Will you torment a windblown leaf?
Will you chase after dry chaff?
—Job 13:24–25

Chapter 28

Is God Hidden?

TO GET the full emotional impact of Job's plight, I winnowed the book's speeches for Job's own words. I expected to find him complaining about his miserable health and lamenting the loss of his children and fortune; but to my surprise Job had relatively little to say about those matters. He focused instead on the single theme of God's absence. What hurt Job most was the sense of crying out in desperation and getting no response. I had heard that same feeling described by many suffering people, perhaps best by C. S. Lewis, who wrote these words in the midst of deep grief after his wife's death from cancer:

Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him . . . you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as

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well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become.¹

Above all else, Job demanded a chance to plead his case before God. His friends' pieties he shook off like a dog shaking off fleas. He wanted the real thing, a personal appointment with God Almighty. Despite what had happened, Job could not bring himself to believe in a God of cruelty and injustice. Perhaps if they met together, at least he could hear God's side of things. But God was nowhere to be found. Job heard only the whining cant of his friends and then a dreadful, vacuous sound. The door slammed in his face.

A Fact of Faith

Oh sweet Lord, I really want to see you, I really want to be with you. . . .

—George Harrison song

I know God is alive: I talked with him this morning!

—bumper sticker

God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.

—evangelism booklet

And he walks with me and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own.

—Christian hymn

Human longing for the actual presence of God may crop up almost anywhere. But we dare not make sweeping claims about the promise of God's intimate presence unless we take into account those times when God seems absent. C. S. Lewis encountered it, Job encountered it, Richard encountered it: at some point nearly everyone must face the fact of God's hiddenness.

The cloud of unknowing can descend without warning, sometimes at the very moment we most urgently desire a sense of God's presence. A South African minister, the Reverend Allan Boesak, was thrown in jail for speaking against the government.

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He spent three weeks in solitary confinement, almost constantly on his knees, praying for God to set him free. "I do not mind telling you," he later related to his congregation, "that this was the most difficult moment of my life. As I knelt there, the words couldn't come anymore and there were no more tears to cry."² His experience was one common to blacks in South Africa: they pray, they weep, they wait, and still they provoke no answer from God.

Some would argue that God does not hide. One religious bumper sticker reads, "If you feel far from God, guess who moved?" But the guilt implicit in the slogan may be false guilt: the Book of Job details a time when, apparently, it was God who moved. Even though Job had done nothing wrong and pled desperately for help, God still chose to stay hidden. (If you ever doubt that an encounter with God's hiddenness is a normal part of the pilgrimage of faith, simply browse in a theological library among the works of the Christian mystics, men and women who have spent their lives in personal communion with God. Search for one, just one, who does not describe a time of severe testing, "the dark night of the soul.")

For those who suffer, and those who stand beside them, Job offers up an important lesson. The doubts and complaints of Meg Woodson and of Allan Boesak, and of Job, are valid responses, not symptoms of weak faith—so valid, in fact, that God made sure the Bible included them all. One does not expect to find the arguments of God's adversaries—say, Mark Twain's *Letters from the Earth* or Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian*—bound into the Bible, but nearly all of them make an appearance, if not in Job, then in the Psalms or Prophets. The Bible seems to anticipate our disappointments, as if God grants us in advance the weapons to use against him, as if God himself understands the cost of sustaining faith.

And, because of Jesus, perhaps he does understand. At Gethsemane and Calvary in some inexpressible way God himself was forced to confront the hiddenness of God. "God striving with God" is how Martin Luther summarized the cosmic struggle played out on two crossbeams of wood. On that dark night, God learned for himself the full extent of what it means to feel God-forsaken.

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Job's friends insisted that God was not hidden. They brought up reminders—dreams, visions, past blessings, the splendors of nature—of how God had proved himself to Job in the past. "Don't forget in the darkness what you learned in the light," they chided. And those of us who live after Job have even more light: the record of fulfilled prophecy, and the life of Jesus. But sometimes all insights or "proofs" will fail. Mere memory, no matter how pleasant, will not deaden pain or loneliness. Perhaps, for a time, all verses of Scripture and all inspirational slogans will likewise fail.

Three Responses

I know too well my own instinctive response to the hiddenness of God: I retaliate by ignoring him. Like a child who thinks he can hide from adults by holding a chubby hand over his eyes, I try to shut God out of my life. If he won't reveal himself to me, why should I acknowledge him?

The Book of Job gives two other responses to such disappointment with God. The first was shown by Job's friends, who were scandalized by his assaults on the most basic tenets of their faith. Job's profound disappointment with God did not match their theology. They saw a clear-cut choice between a man who claimed to be just and a God they knew to be just. The very idea of Job demanding an audience with God! Suppress your feelings, they told him. We know for a fact that God is not unjust. So stop thinking that! Shame on you for the outrageous things you're saying!

The second response, Job's, was a rambling mess, a jarring counterpoint to his friends' relentless logic. "Why then did you bring me out of the womb?" he demanded of God. "I wish I had died before any eye ever saw me." Job lashed out in a protest he knew to be futile, like a bird repeatedly hurling itself against a windowpane. He had few sound arguments, and even admitted that his friends' logic sounded right. He wavered, contradicted himself, backtracked, and sometimes collapsed in despair. This man renowned for his righteousness railed against God: "Turn

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away from me so I can have a moment's joy before I go to the place of no return, to the land of gloom and deep shadow."

And which of the two responses does the book endorse? Both parties needed some correction, but after all the windy words had been uttered, God ordered the pious friends to crawl repentantly to Job and ask him to pray on their behalf.

One bold message in the Book of Job is that you can say anything to God. Throw at him your grief, your anger, your doubt, your bitterness, your betrayal, your disappointment—he can absorb them all. As often as not, spiritual giants of the Bible are shown *contending* with God. They prefer to go away limping like Jacob, rather than to shut God out. In this respect, the Bible prefigures a tenet of modern psychology: you can't really deny your feelings or make them disappear, so you might as well express them. God can deal with every human response save one. He cannot abide the response I fall back on instinctively: an attempt to ignore him or treat him as though he does not exist. That response never once occurred to Job.

The Big Picture

Freedom to express feelings is not the only lesson from Job, however. The "behind the curtain" view of proceedings in the unseen world shows that an encounter with the hiddenness of God may badly mislead. It may tempt us to see God as the enemy and to interpret his hiddenness as a lack of concern.

Job concluded just that: "God assails me and tears me in his anger." Those of us in the audience know that Job was mistaken. For one thing, the prologue makes the subtle but important distinction that God did not personally cause Job's problems. He permitted them, yes, but the account of The Wager presents Satan, not God, as the instigator of Job's suffering. In any event, God was surely not Job's enemy. Far from being abandoned by God, Job was getting direct, almost microscopic scrutiny from him. At the very moment Job was pleading for a courtroom trial to present his case, he was actually participating in a trial of cosmic

significance—not as the prosecuting attorney jabbing his finger at God, but as the main witness in a test of faith.

By no means can we infer that our own trials are, like Job's, specially arranged by God to settle some decisive issue in the universe. But we can safely assume that our limited range of vision will in similar fashion distort reality. Pain narrows vision. The most private of sensations, it forces us to think of ourselves and little else.

From Job, we can learn that much more is going on out there than we may suspect. Job felt the weight of God's absence; but a look behind the curtain reveals that in one sense God had never been more present. In the natural world, human beings only receive about 30 percent of the light spectrum. (Honeybees and homing pigeons can, for example, detect ultraviolet light waves invisible to us.) In the supernatural realm, our vision is even more limited, and we get only occasional glimpses of that unseen world.

An incident in the life of another famous Bible character makes this same point in a very different way. The prophet Daniel had a mild—mild in comparison with Job's—encounter with the hiddenness of God. Daniel puzzled over an everyday problem of unanswered prayer: why was God ignoring his repeated requests? For twenty-one days Daniel devoted himself to prayer. He mourned. He gave up choice foods. He swore off meat and wine, and used no lotions on his body. All the while he called out to God, but received no answer.

Then one day Daniel got far more than he bargained for. A supernatural being, with eyes like flaming torches and a face like lightning, suddenly showed up on a riverbank beside him. Daniel's companions all fled in terror. As for Daniel, "I had no strength left. My face turned deathly pale and I was helpless." When he tried talking to the dazzling being, he could hardly breathe.

The visitor proceeded to explain the reason for the long delay. He had been dispatched to answer Daniel's very first prayer, but had run into strong resistance from "the prince of the Persian kingdom." Finally, after a three-week standoff, reinforcements arrived and Michael, one of the chief angels, helped him break through the opposition.

I will not attempt to interpret this amazing scene of the universe at war, except to point out a parallel to Job. Like Job, Daniel played a decisive role in the warfare between cosmic forces of good and evil, though much of the action took place beyond his range of vision. To him, prayer may have seemed futile, and God indifferent; but a glimpse "behind the curtain" reveals exactly the opposite. Daniel's limited perspective, like Job's, distorted reality.

What are we to make of Daniel's angelic being who needed reinforcements, not to mention the cosmic wager in Job? Simply this: the big picture, with the whole universe as a backdrop, includes much activity that we never see. When we stubbornly cling to God in a time of hardship, or when we simply pray, more—much more—may be involved than we ever dream. It requires faith to believe that, and faith to trust that we are never abandoned, no matter how distant God seems.

At the end, when he heard the Voice from the whirlwind, Job finally attained that faith. God reeled off natural phenomena—the solar system, constellations, thunderstorms, wild animals—that Job could not begin to explain. *If you can't comprehend the visible world you live in, how dare you expect to comprehend a world you cannot even see!* Conscious of the big picture at last, Job repented in dust and ashes.

God is like a person who clears his throat while hiding and so gives himself away.

—Meister Eckhardt

¹C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 9.

²Allan Boesak, "If You Believe," *Reformed Journal*, (November 1985), 11.

FIVE

The Challenge to Faith

*The other gods were strong, but Thou was weak.
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne.
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds but Thou alone.*

—Edward Shillito, from “Jesus of the Scars”

Answers for the Heart

We said that the visceral argument against God happens at the heart level. Pascal's insightful phrase “reasons of the heart” refers neither to mere irrational feelings nor simply to logical propositions. They are best described as intuitions—explanations that not only give some light to the mind but are also existentially comforting or satisfying. A “reason for the heart,” unlike an abstract proposition, affects and changes attitudes and actions. I propose that there are three powerful themes of Christian teaching that can serve us in this way when it comes to the pain and suffering of life. Each one not only helps enrich our understanding of suffering but directly affects our attitudes, giving us a new frame of heart capable of facing adversity.

The first set of Christian teachings that frame the heart in this way are the doctrines of creation and fall. Genesis 1 and 2 show us human-kind put by God into a world without death or suffering. The evil we see today was not part of God's original design. It was not God's intent for human life. That means that ultimately, even a peaceful death at the

age of ninety years old is *not* the way things were meant to be. Those of us who sense the “wrongness” of death—in any form—are correct. The “rage at the dying of the light” is our intuition that we were not meant for mortality, for the loss of love, or for the triumph of darkness. In order to help people face death and grief we often tell people that death is a perfectly natural part of life. But that asks them to repress a very right and profound human intuition—that we were not meant to simply go to dust, and that love was meant to last.

Genesis 3 confirms this intuition in great detail, showing us the origin of the world’s darkness and how it unfolded out of our refusal to let God be our lord and king. When we turned from God and lost that relationship, all other relationships fell apart. Because we rejected his authority everything about the world—our hearts, emotions, bodies, our relationships to other people, and our relationship to nature itself—stopped working as it should.

The Fall of humankind means that the original design of the world is broken. In the Garden, men and women were called to work—to care for and cultivate the earth. When Adam and Eve sinned, part of the curse was that now “thorns and thistles” would grow out of the ground as well as flowers and food. This means that the good pattern of the life God created here is not completely eradicated, but it now falls far short of its original intent. It should be that hard work would always lead to prosperity, but now sometimes you can work hard and injustice or disaster wipes it away. The doctrine of the Fall, then, gives us a remarkably nuanced understanding of suffering.

On the one hand, this teaching rejects the idea that people who suffer more are always worse people than those who suffer less. That was the self-righteous premise of Job’s friends who sat around him and said, “The reason this is happening to you and not to us is because we are living right and you are not.” At the end of the book, God expresses his fury at Job’s “miserable comforters.” The world is too fallen and deeply broken to divide into a neat pattern of good people having good lives and bad people having bad lives. The brokenness of the world is inherited by the entire human race. As Jesus says, the sun shines and the rain falls on both the just and the unjust (Matt 5:45).

The individual sufferer is not necessarily receiving a due payment for specific wrongdoings.

But on the other hand, while we must never say that every particular instance of suffering is caused by a particular sin, it is fair to say that suffering and death in general is a natural consequence and just judgment of God on our sin. Therefore we cannot protest that the human race, considering our record, deserves a better life than the one we have now.

All of this comprises a “reason of the heart” for sufferers because, when accepted, it brings the relief of humility. Often the unstated assumption of many people is that it is God’s job to create a world in which things benefit us. We saw how the Deism of the eighteenth century explicitly promoted this idea though it was at loggerheads with the book of Genesis and the rest of the Bible. Nevertheless, this idea has captured the hearts of most people, as sociologist Christian Smith points out. From his research he concluded that most young American adults are “practical Deists”—though few of them have ever heard the term. Smith means that they see God as a being whose job it is to meet their needs. The implicit but strong cultural assumption of young adults is that God owes all but the most villainous people a comfortable life. This premise, however, inevitably leads to bitter disillusionment. Life is nasty, hard, brutish, and always feels too short. The presumption of spiritual entitlement dooms its bearers to a life of confusion when things in life inevitably go wrong.

When we stand back to consider the premise—that God owes us a good life—it is clearly unwarranted. If there really is an infinitely glorious God, why should the universe revolve around us rather than around him? If we look at the biblical God’s standards for our behavior—the Golden Rule, the Ten Commandments, and the Sermon on the Mount—and then consider humanity’s record against those norms, it may occur to us that the real riddle of evil is not what we thought. Perhaps the real puzzle is this: Why, in light of our behavior as a human race, does God allow so much *happiness*? The teaching of creation and fall removes the self-pity that afflicts people with the deistic view of life. It strengthens the soul, preparing it to be unsurprised when life is hard.

The Renewal of the World

The second Christian doctrine that speaks so well to our hearts is that of the final judgment and the renewal of the world. Many people complain that they cannot believe in a God who judges and punishes people. But if there is no Judgment Day, what about all the enormous amount of injustice that has been and is being perpetrated? If there is no Judgment Day, then there are only two things to do—lose all hope or turn to vengeance. Either it means that the tyranny and oppression that have been so dominant over the ages will never be redressed, and in the end it will make no difference whether you live a life of justice and kindness or a life of cruelty and selfishness, or it means that, since there is no Judgment Day, we will need to take up our weapons and go and hunt down the evildoers now. We will have to take justice into our own hands. We will have to be the judges, if there is no Judge.

And so the biblical doctrine of Judgment Day, far from being a gloomy idea, enables us to live with both hope and grace. If we accept it, we get hope and incentive to work for justice. For no matter how little success we may have now, we know that justice *will* be established—fully and perfectly. All wrongs—what we have called moral evil—will be redressed. But it also enables us to be gracious, to forgive, and to refrain from vengefulness and violence. Why? If we are not sure that there will be a final judgment, then when we are wronged, we will feel an almost irresistible compulsion to take up the sword and smite the wrongdoers. But if we know that no one will get away with anything, and that all wrongs will be ultimately redressed, then we can live in peace. The doctrine of Judgment Day warns us that we have neither the knowledge to know exactly what people deserve, nor the right to mete out punishment when we are sinners ourselves (Rom 2:1–16, 12:17–21). So belief in Judgment Day keeps us from being too passive or too violently aggressive in our pursuit of truth and justice.

But it is what lies on the far side of Judgment Day that is of the deepest consolation to sufferers. Peter van Inwagen writes:

At some point, for all eternity, there will be no more unmerited suffering: this present darkness, “the age of evil,” will eventually be remembered as a brief flicker at the beginning of human history. Every evil done by the wicked to the innocent will have been avenged, and every tear will have been wiped away.²⁰¹

As we have said, there is no fully satisfying theodicy that completely shows why God is justified in allowing evil. Nevertheless, the Christian doctrine of the resurrection and the renewal of the world—when all the biblical promises and implications are weighed and grasped—comes the closest to any real explanation we have. The resurrection of the body means that we do not merely receive a consolation for the life we have lost but a restoration of it. We not only get the bodies and lives we had but the bodies and lives we wished for but had never before received. We get a glorious, perfect, unimaginably rich life in a renewed material world.

Often we can see how bad things “work together for good” (Rom 8:28). The problem is that we can only glimpse this sometimes, in a limited number of cases. But why could it not be that God allowed evil because it will bring us all to a far greater glory and joy than we would have had otherwise? Isn’t it possible that the eventual glory and joy we will know will be infinitely greater than it would have been had there been no evil? What if that future world will somehow be greater for having once been broken and lost? If such is the case, that would truly mean the utter defeat of evil. Evil would not just be an obstacle to our beauty and bliss, but it will have only made it better. Evil would have accomplished the very opposite of what it intended.

How might that come about? At the simplest level, we know that only if there is danger can there be courage. And apart from sin and evil, we would never have seen the courage of God, or the astonishing extent of his love, or the glory of a deity who lays aside his glory and goes to the cross. For us here in this life, the thought of God’s glory is rather remote and abstract. But we must realize that the most rapturous delights you have ever had—in the beauty of a landscape, or in the pleasure