

Where Can I Find God?

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

¹ Then Job answered:

² "Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning.

³ Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling!

⁴ I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments.

⁵ I would learn what he would answer me and understand what he would say to me.

⁶ Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me.

⁷ There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.

⁸ "If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him;

⁹ on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.

¹⁶ God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me;

¹⁷ If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!"

What do you do when you are in the midst of suffering, pain, and despair?

What happens to your faith when everything seems to be going wrong in your life?

Last week we began a series of four sermons on the Biblical book of Job. Job was a businessman who lived in ancient times in Uz. According to his story he lost his sheep business, camel business, oxen business, donkey business, his workforce in a very short period of time, to war and natural disasters. To add insult to injury, he lost all 10 of his children in what may have been a tornado. Regardless of his losses, Job continued to trust in God.

In today's scripture Job is in a period of extreme physical suffering. He has painful boils all over his body. Three friends come to visit, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, along with a younger friend, Elihu (chaps. 32-37). They come to comfort

and advise. Job is in so much pain that he curses the day of his birth. The friends remind Job that God rewards righteousness with peace, prosperity, and long life, while sin is punished. The friends become increasingly impatient with Job's rants.

Eliphaz argues that mortals are of no use to God, morally, because of human wickedness (22:2-5). He concludes with a promise of peace and restoration *provided Job repents of his sin* (vv. 21-30). But Job too understands the doctrine of retribution and even affirms God's justice and mercy; but whereas the friends say, "Since you are suffering, you must have done something to deserve this," Job has championed the other side of the same coin, saying, in effect, "No! I am innocent, I do not deserve this!" In his scathing response to Eliphaz, Job's problem is not with God's attributes; Job's problem is with God's absence. He laments that he is "an upright person" and that if he could only find God and gain a hearing, God would surely hear his case and acquit him according to the very principles of retributive justice the friends are preaching (vv. 3-7). But, alas, God is nowhere to be found (vv. 8-9). This painful situation pulls Job in two directions. On the one hand, he remains confident in his belief that if God would only hear his case, he would be acquitted. On the other hand, Job is terrified (v. 16) that God's absence means that God's power will be exercised autocratically; God "stands alone [Heb: v. 13] and who can dissuade him? What he desires, that he does" (v. 13). **Mark A.**

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Various people react to suffering different. Life is suffering. Thus teaches the first of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism: "Birth is ill, decay is ill, sickness is ill, death is ill." In Buddhist teaching, enlightenment leads to recognition of the illusion of the self and therewith the cessation of desire, which causes suffering.

Another reaction to suffering is that of Elie Wiesel, the Jewish writer who has spent his life attempting to come to grips with the Holocaust that he experienced

firsthand as a boy in the Nazi concentration camps, recounts his loss of faith in God as a result of that dehumanizing experience:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed.... Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust.

Wiesel reports that other Jews in the camps continued to trust in and pray to God as their ancestors had done for centuries. Other Jews have gone even further than Wiesel by questioning the very reality of God.

Life in this world is not a fairy tale that always has a happy ending! With Marx and Freud (also Jews), we must ask to what extent our religious traditions function as opiates to numb pain or are comforting illusions about the nature of reality. For, in the final analysis, what is the truth about God? **Paul E. Capetz**

In *A Grief Observed*, C. S. Lewis is awash in a sea of grief and pain in the wake of his wife's death. He too probes deeply into dark questions of faith, asking "Meanwhile, where is God?" In previous times of happiness, Lewis claims that he found God present everywhere he turned. But in the midst of his present anguish, searching for God is like knocking on the door of a house and hearing the door being bolted in your face. What you are left with, he says, is silence, and the disturbing fear that maybe this is what God is like after all.

In bitterness upon the ash heap, Job cries out, "Oh, that I knew where I might find [God]" (v. 3). Poet Ann Weems lost her son Todd on the day of his twenty-first birthday; in her "Lament Psalm Eight," she joins Job and the host of others who struggle with faith and loss when God is nowhere to be found. That same searching, longing for God in the face of hardship, finds voice in popular music

too. At the end of the CD *Pop*, the rock band U2's singer Bono pleads for God to do something in the midst of the suffering that threatens to undo faith and life, wondering if God is busy or Jesus' hands are tied. Speaking the darkness of faith is a daring, and faithful, act.

While those of us nurtured in the Judeo-Christian traditions also acknowledge the painful realities of life, our starting point is very different from that of the great Indian traditions. "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). The premise of biblical religion is the goodness of God, who created a good world. Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly," John 10:10.

Job lifts his voice in protest. He wants his day in court so as to plead his case before the judge of the universe. He has faith that an upright person can reason with God. But how can a person argue with God? R. B. Y. Scott says of Job:

Here speaks a free religious spirit, untrammelled either by orthodox belief or by dogmatic atheism.... He challenges the very world order of which he is a part.... Maybe this is the profoundest kind of religious faith... a sublime confidence that to ask ultimate questions of God is not to turn away from him but to draw nearer to him?

This reminds me of the prayer/poem *Footsteps in the sand*:

One night I dreamed a dream. I was walking along the beach with my Lord. Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life. For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand, one belonging to me and one to my Lord.

When the last scene of my life shot before me, I looked back at the footprints in the sand. There was only one set of footprints. I realized that this was at the lowest and saddest times of my life. This always bothered me and I questioned the Lord about my dilemma.

"Lord, You told me when I decided to follow You, You would walk and talk with me all the way. But I'm aware that during the most troublesome times of my life there is only one set of footprints. I just don't understand why, when I need You most, You leave me."

He whispered, "My precious child, I love you and will never leave you, never, ever, during your trials and testing. When you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

There is a word of hope for the church, for the God whom Job sought has indeed sought us and found us, even in the midst of our suffering. Indeed, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, in a world of suffering "only the suffering God can help." Job's cry is answered by Jesus on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ([Mark 15:34](#)). For here, in the midst of Jesus' anguished cry, we find that the depth of human suffering has been taken into God's very being. God is very much aware of the realities of suffering, for God's Son has himself suffered. The apostle Paul reminds us, in light of Christ's suffering, that the good news of the gospel is that in Jesus Christ, we know that *nothing*—not injustice, not suffering, not even an overwhelming sense of God's absence—can separate us from God's love ([Rom. 8:31-39](#)). Safe and secure in this good news, we are set free to lament and to argue our case with God.

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