

Understanding Suffering

Across many centuries and several millennia, people of faith have struggled with a universal question: If we believe in an omnipotent and just God, how do we explain suffering and evil in the world? The theological term used to describe this question is *theodicy*. The word derives from two Greek words, *theos* (God) + *dike* (justice). It was coined by the German philosopher and mathematician, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz. In his *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal* (English translation: *Essays of theodicy on the goodness of God, the freedom of man and the origin of evil*), published in 1710, Leibniz attempts to provide a philosophical resolution of the problem of evil by arguing that an omnipotent and omniscient God could not choose to create an imperfect world, so this must be the best that is possible under the present conditions.

But, of course, the questions persist. Why do the righteous suffer without justice? Is it right for children to bear the consequences of their parents' sin? Why do the wicked thrive and appear to go unpunished for their wrongdoings? Is there some meaning to human suffering, or is it merely random and arbitrary? Where is God's justice, or is God impotent and incapable of asserting power over evil? Does God care about human suffering? Why does God allow catastrophes such as earthquakes, floods, and fires? All of us can relate to these questions, especially when the difficulties of life become too much to bear.

At the risk of oversimplification, we could distill these theodicy questions into two sets of interrelated but sometimes seemingly contradictory assertions: (1) God is sovereign and God is just, and (2) the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished. If we acknowledge the existence of evil in the world, we are forced to question whether or to what extent God has power over evil. However, if we assert the sovereignty of God, we must wonder about God's justice, as experience shows us that evil does indeed go unpunished at times and good people do suffer harm. If we say that God will always reward the righteous, we have to consider whether human understandings of justice are consistent with God's views of justice. When we see evil people go unpunished, and especially when we are the victims of violence, we begin to wonder whether God cares or is capable of caring about human suffering.

Old Testament Teachings about Suffering

Obviously issues related to suffering and theodicy are difficult and complicated. The Judeo-Christian tradition has narrowed the range of questions somewhat by consistently asserting the sovereignty of God in all things (e.g., see Exodus 15:11–13; Jeremiah 32:17,27; Psalm 86:8–10, 89:14–15). There is no deity that can oppose God's power. Indeed there are no other deities at all, because God is the creator of all things. With this assertion in place, the focus shifts to God's justice. In the prophetic books and books of the Old Testament that are associated with the Deuteronomistic historian (e.g., Joshua, Judges, First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings), the answer is simple: God punishes the Israelites when they fail to keep the Covenant with God and when they act unjustly toward the poor, the widow, and the orphan. But when they are repentant, God forgives. Here are two examples:

Because the Israelites had offended the LORD by forgetting the LORD, their God, and serving the Baals and the Asherahs, the anger of the LORD flared up against them, and he allowed them to fall into the power of Cushan-rishathaim, king of Aram Naharaim, whom they served for eight years. But when the Israelites cried out to the LORD, he raised up for them a savior, Othniel, son of Caleb's younger brother Kenaz, who rescued them. (Judges 3:7–9)



Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel,
 for the LORD has a grievance
 against the inhabitants of the land:
 There is no fidelity, no mercy,
 no knowledge of God in the land.
 False swearing, lying, murder, stealing and adultery!
 in their lawlessness, bloodshed follows bloodshed.
 Therefore the land mourns,
 and everything that dwells in it languishes:
 The beasts of the field,
 the birds of the air,
 and even the fish of the sea perish.

(Hosea 4:1–3)

We should note that these biblical authors tend to address concrete situations (e.g., historical battles, deportations, and physical calamities), which are viewed as God's response to Israel's action or inaction. The literature presupposes a clear cause-and-effect relationship between Israel's wrongdoing and the consequences it experiences. Sin and suffering, guilt and punishment go hand-in-hand, and little attention is given to the ambiguities and contradictions that inevitably arise with such a worldview. Thus God's justice is never really challenged.

In contrast to the literature of the prophets and the Deuteronomistic historian, the Bible's wisdom tradition reflects on the full range of human experiences of suffering, including natural disasters, early death, and unwarranted misery. The biblical wisdom tradition includes the Books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, and Sirach. The authors of this literature attempt to design rules concerning the nature of suffering, its origins, and its purpose in life, but, unlike the prophetic literature, which tend to focus on communal suffering, the wisdom tradition concentrates more on the situations of the individual righteous or wicked person.

The wisdom tradition's theories about suffering and theodicy are somewhat difficult to unpack, but we can discern certain strands or threads in its development. For example, rules about how the righteous are always rewarded and the wicked are always punished abound in the Books of Psalms and Proverbs. Here is a small sampling:

A wise man heeds commands, but a prating fool will be overthrown. (Proverbs 10:8)

He who walks honestly walks securely, but he whose ways are crooked will fare badly.
 (Proverbs 10:9)

It is the LORD's blessing that makes wealth, and no effort can substitute for it.
 (Proverbs 10:22)



Misfortune pursues sinners, but the just shall be recompensed with good.
(Proverbs 13:21)

In the house of the just there are ample resources, but the earnings of the wicked are in turmoil. (Proverbs 15:6)

The kindly man will be blessed, for he gives of his sustenance to the poor. . . . He who oppresses the poor to enrich himself will yield up his gains to the rich as sheer loss.
(Proverbs 22:9,16)

Happy are those who fear the LORD,
 who greatly delight in God’s commands.
Their descendants shall be mighty in the land,
 a generation upright and blessed.
Wealth and riches shall be in their homes;
 their prosperity shall endure forever.

.....

The wicked shall be angry to see this;
 they will gnash their teeth and waste away;
 the desires of the wicked come to nothing.

(Psalm 112:1–3,10)

These examples share a fairly straightforward approach to God’s justice. The righteous—people who obey God’s will and care for the poor—are rewarded in this life with blessings of health, wealth, and prosperous families. The wicked (or foolish) suffer loss of wealth, health, and status in this life.

However, the sages also recognize that this rule of reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked does not always correspond with human experience. More often than not, the wicked seem to prosper as they oppressed the weak and inflicted violence on those who opposed them. The sages’ response: the wicked will suffer—secretly, perhaps with melancholy, mental struggles, hidden illnesses, if not in this life then after death—but they will be punished. Psalm 73 is a good example:

But as for me, I lost my balance;
 my feet all but slipped,
Because I was envious of the arrogant
 when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For they suffer no pain;
 their bodies are healthy and sleek.

.....



You set them, indeed, on a slippery road;
you hurl them down to ruin.
How suddenly they are devastated;
undone by disasters forever!
They are like a dream after waking, Lord,
dismissed like shadows when you arise.

(verses 2–4, 18–20)

The wisdom tradition has sometimes dealt with the unwarranted suffering of the righteous by asserting its educational value. According to this theory, God is portrayed as a father who chastens his children so that they will grow in wisdom or virtue. The Books of Psalms and Proverbs illustrate this rule well:

The discipline of the LORD, my son, disdain not;
spurn not his reproof;
For whom the LORD loves he reproves,
and he chastises the son he favors.

(Proverbs 3:12)

Happy those whom you guide, LORD,
whom you teach by your instruction.
You give them rest from evil days,
while a pit is being dug for the wicked.

(Psalm 94:12–13)

The LORD chastised me harshly,
but did not hand me over to death.
Open the gates of victory;
I will enter and thank the LORD.
This is the LORD's own gate,
where the victors enter.

(Psalm 118:18–20)

It was good for me to be afflicted,
in order to learn your laws.
Teaching from your lips is more precious to me
than heaps of silver and gold.

(Psalm 119:71–72)



Another theory that the sages sometimes use to explain God's apparent failure to reward the righteous is what biblical scholars call the humiliation-exaltation motif. Frequently, it concerns the unwarranted persecution of individuals who have committed their lives to God. Because God is all-powerful and just, at some future time God will vindicate the righteous. The righteous person's reward is delayed so that God's might can be revealed against the wicked. The story of Daniel in the lion's den is a good example: Daniel's enemies try to get rid of him by talking King Darius into making a royal decree that his subjects could not make petition to anyone but himself for a month or else he would be thrown into a den of lions (see Daniel 6:1–10).

Daniel, being obedient to God's law, openly continues to make his daily prayers, so his enemies tell the king, who then feels obligated to arrest Daniel and have him thrown to the lions, even though it makes him very sad (see Daniel 6:11–18). The next day the king goes to the lion's den to learn of Daniel's fate and is joyful to discover that Daniel's God had saved him from certain death. Daniel is removed from the den "because he trusted in his God" (6:24), and the king orders that Daniel's enemies, including their women and children, be thrown into the den instead. In a divine act of vindication and retribution, they are devoured before they hit bottom! The lesson is this: trust God, even when you are suffering unjustly.

Although a less common approach to the problem of suffering, some of the sages adopt a very pessimistic view of humans' ability to understand God's justice. Qoheleth, the sage of the Book of Ecclesiastes is an example:

Again I considered all the oppressions that take place under the sun: the tears of the victims with none to comfort them! From the hand of their oppressors comes violence, and there is none to comfort them! And those now dead, I declared more fortunate in death than are the living to be still alive. And better off than both is the yet unborn, who has not seen the wicked work that is done under the sun. Then I saw that all toil and skillful work is the rivalry of one man for another. This also is vanity and a chase after wind. (Ecclesiastes 4:1–4)

Qoheleth's response to theodicy is so dark that one might rightfully wonder whether he has abandoned the core doctrine that God is omnipotent and just. However, the epilogue of the Book of Ecclesiastes makes it very clear that he has not: "The last word, when all is heard: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is man's all; because God will bring to judgment every work, with all its hidden qualities, whether good or bad" (Ecclesiastes 12:13–14).

The Book of Job

Finally, the most frequently cited text in any discussion of theodicy in the Old Testament is the Book of Job. The text is very long and worthy of a thorough study of its own, but, for the sake of brevity, we will sketch out only its major themes. First, a word about its literary form: it consists of a series of poetic dialogues framed by a short folktale about a righteous and prosperous man who became an unfortunate pawn in a cat-and-mouse game between God and Satan. Their objective is to see if they can break Job's piety and make him curse God. Satan, we should note, is not the devil but rather an adversary in God's court of justice. At the end of the story, Job is vindicated and restored to his original position of prosperity, but, between the beginning and end of the story, there is much discussion about suffering and its causes.

When the righteous Job's property is destroyed, his children are killed, and he is struck down with illness, his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, come to visit. They recognize that Job is truly suffering, so, following the traditional theory that God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous, they attempt to counsel him toward repentance and submission to God's "instruction." But Job protests



his innocence and his friends return the same arguments, until it becomes clear that there is no solution to this problem of Job's suffering. Finally, Job demands a hearing before God. But as if to hold us all in suspense a bit longer, a young boy named Elihu appears and rehearses many of the same arguments Job's friends had made earlier.

When God does appear, it is as a thundering voice in a mighty storm! In two long speeches, each composed of a series of rhetorical questions, God demonstrates his almighty power and his wisdom in managing and caring for creation (see Job 38–39,40–41). God apparently knows that Job has demanded an account for the suffering he has experienced (see 40:1–8), and, although God never answers Job directly, his final response to God shows that he understands:

I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be hindered.
I have dealt with great things that I do not understand;
things too wonderful for me, which I cannot know.
I had heard of you by word of mouth,
but now my eye has seen you.
Therefore I disown what I have said,
and repent in dust and ashes.

(42:2–6)

Immediately following Job's response, in the epilogue of the book, we hear God say he is angry with Eliphaz and his friends because they spoke wrongly of God (see Job 42:7–9). From the context it is clear that they spoke wrongly about the traditional theory of suffering: that God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous. Divine retribution is not always the explanation for suffering, but God is indeed omnipotent and full of wisdom. Just as there are mysteries about God and creation that are beyond our understanding, so too there are mysteries about all of the causes and purposes of suffering. Our responsibility is to honor God.

Christian Understandings of Suffering

From a Christian perspective, the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ is a definitive moment in the salvation story. Likewise, this sacred event is pivotal for Christian understandings of theodicy, particularly the problem of the unwarranted suffering of the righteous. We should be clear, however, that the New Testament does not abandon the theory of divine retribution that is so plainly evident in the Old Testament. Instead, it uses the death and Resurrection of Jesus as a paradigm for understanding the unwarranted suffering of God's holy ones.

Though we might appeal to a wide variety of New Testament texts to illustrate its understanding of the suffering of the righteous, again for the sake of brevity, we will focus our attention on the First Letter of Peter, a pseudonymous work written sometime between AD 70 and AD 90. Whoever wrote this letter and whatever communities first received it, they appear to have had first-hand knowledge of the realities of suffering for the sake of their faith. The author tells the audience that Christians should consider themselves living in this world as "aliens and sojourners" (1 Peter 2:11), because Christ's suffering has already delivered them from the useless and unimportant things of life (see 1:17–18). They need not be troubled over their situation because they are already saved through Baptism (see 3:21). They should act respectfully, loving one another from the heart and conducting themselves blamelessly (see 2:12; 3:8;



4:7–11), and they should be encouraged in their suffering, because suffering purifies one's faith and makes it more genuine (see 1:7).

The author of the First Letter of Peter also tells his audience that they should never be ashamed for suffering as a Christian, because they also will share in Christ's glory (see 4:16; cf. 3:14). When someone abuses them, they should answer evil or insult with a blessing (see 3:9). If someone challenges their reason for hope, they should answer respectfully. By treating their persecutors kindly, they will make their persecutors ashamed (see 3:15–16). Finally, they should understand that they do not suffer alone. Indeed, the Christian shares in the sufferings of Christians all over the world (see 5:9).

It should not come as a surprise that the model for this theology of suffering is Christ himself. These are the words of the letter writer:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps.

“He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

When he was insulted, he returned no insult; when he suffered, he did not threaten; instead, he handed himself over to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:21–24)

The quotation the letter writer uses is from Isaiah 53:9 and the imagery, likewise, comes from the fourth Servant Song of the Prophet Isaiah (see 52:13—53:12), in which the righteous remnant of Judah is exalted by God for allowing itself to be offered up as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the nations. By appealing to the Prophet Isaiah in this way, the letter writer not only provides a context for understanding the suffering of Christ but also links Christ's suffering to their own suffering.

The letter writer's theology of suffering also extends to his description of Baptism. Notice how he plays on imagery from the story of Noah and the Flood in Genesis:

For Christ also suffered for sins once, the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous, that he might lead you to God. Put to death in the flesh, he was brought to life in the spirit. In it he also went to preach to the spirits in prison, who had once been disobedient while God patiently waited in the days of Noah during the building of the ark, in which a few persons, eight in all, were saved through water. This prefigured baptism, which saves you now. It is not a removal of dirt from the body, but an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 3:18–21)

The author's mention of Christ's preaching to the “spirits in prison” may be a reference to Christ's descent into the underworld to rescue the righteous people who preceded his death and Resurrection—Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, to name a few (see also 1 Peter 4:6). At any rate, the author of the First Letter of Peter wants Christian believers to understand that because of their Baptism they need not fear suffering. Instead they should rejoice in their suffering, because Christ already suffered for them so that they can enjoy a share in his glory.

Another New Testament book that is critical to Christian understandings of suffering is the Book of Revelation. It was written by a Christian prophet named John in approximately AD 95–96 at the height of persecution under the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian. The Book of Revelation is best described as apocalyptic literature. Although many people mistakenly think that apocalyptic literature provides a sort of



roadmap or timeline for the end of the world, in fact its purpose is quite different. Apocalypses do three things: (1) they console people in situations of persecution, (2) they present a particular interpretation of historical events that focuses on the justice and sovereignty of God and the triumph of good over evil, and (3) they persuade their hearers to keep the Covenant with God—that is, to live in a way that ensures that they will be among God’s elect in the end time.

With these objectives in mind, the author of the Book of Revelation recounts several collections of visions, some of which are situated in the heavenly realm and others on earth, some pertaining to the believing community as it anticipates persecution, others relating to those who have endured the suffering and proved themselves faithful. Throughout all these visions, John treats questions of theodicy by repeatedly asserting that God is sovereign, reigning supreme not only over the heavenly realm but also over the earthly realm and even the underworld. Likewise, he repeatedly asserts that God is just by promising that God will reward his holy ones who suffer persecution and that the forces of evil, the great dragon and the beasts of the sea and the land (the Roman Empire and its emperor), and all their minions, will be destroyed.

John concludes his book with a stunning vision of the hope that awaits God’s holy ones who suffer because of the Word of God. In this vision the Holy City, a new Jerusalem, comes down from Heaven, beautiful as a bride who is ready to meet her bridegroom (see Revelation 20:2–3). Seated on a mountain, bejeweled and perfectly structured, the city is the dwelling place of God and the Lamb, the Risen and Triumphant Christ (see 21:9–21). It has no temple, because the glory of God and the Lamb is present everywhere, lighting the whole city (see 21:22–24). A river of life-giving water flows from God’s throne through the city’s street. On both sides there are trees with fruit for eating and leaves for healing. Here all God’s holy ones will live in peace and safety, and God will “wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, [for] the old order has passed away” (21:4).

Amen! Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev 22:20)

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