

**“Why is there suffering?”**

Job 40:6-14, 42:1-6

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Second in a four-part series on *The Shack*

**Then Job replied to the LORD :**

**"I know that you can do all things;  
no plan of yours can be thwarted.  
You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?'  
Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,  
things too wonderful for me to know.  
"You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak;  
I will question you,  
and you shall answer me.'  
My ears had heard of you  
but now my eyes have seen you.  
Therefore I despise myself  
and repent in dust and ashes."**

Why is there so much suffering? Why doesn't God do something about it? What kind of God sits idly by while countless people cry out in hunger, pain, and grief? Why would God leave a million children homeless, parentless, or bereaved in Haiti? These are questions about **theodicy**---why and how a good and all-powerful God allows suffering.

The recent tragic events in Port-au-Prince are tailor-made for these questions. As Job might have said, would God “crush an impoverished people with an earthquake and multiply their wounds without cause?” These are impossible questions, and yet it is hard to imagine anyone with any sort of faith NOT asking these questions. The situation in Haiti is so incomprehensible it has left many people doubting God.

The situation in Haiti is a Job-like scenario. The situation in Haiti has it all:

- human suffering that is a direct result of ***natural disaster***
- human suffering that is a direct result of ***corporate sin***,
- and human suffering that is a direct result of ***personal sin***.

**Personal sin** is emphasized in William Paul Young's book, *The Shack*. The main character's inconsolable grief is linked to one murderer's evil action. Mack is angry with God for allowing his precious daughter to be murdered. He is struggling with his own suffering, and with God's role in it. There are several conversations between Mack and God about suffering. At one point here's what God says to Mack:

*...there are millions of reasons to allow pain and hurt and suffering rather than to eradicate them, but most of those reasons can only be understood within each person's story. I am not evil. You are the ones who embrace fear and pain and power and rights so readily in your relationships. But your choices are also not stronger than my purposes, and I will use every choice you make for the ultimate good and the most loving outcome.*

*You try to make sense of the world in which you live based on a very small and incomplete picture of reality. It is like looking at a parade through the tiny knothole of hurt, pain, self-centeredness, and power, and believing you are on your own and insignificant. You see pain and death as ultimate evils and God as the ultimate betrayer. You dictate the terms and judge my actions and find me guilty.<sup>1</sup>*

This sounds a lot like the conversation we just heard between God and Job. There's a lot here. Let's look at it.

First, Young seems to be saying God uses suffering for reasons beyond our capacity to understand. This is the "God makes lemonade out of very bitter lemons" answer to suffering. Lots of people don't find this very convincing. It's certainly not comforting. While we can all think of situations in which good comes out of suffering, knowing this does not diminish the pain.

Second, Young seems to be saying we humans create much of our own suffering. This rings true for most of us, most of the time. This certainly is true in the case of corporate and personal sin. It is harder to buy into this when suffering is the result of natural disasters. It is impossible to see this when you are victimized.

Finally, Young tries to address the fact that our knowledge of reality is woefully incomplete. We can only know a very tiny slice of reality. We only know a little bit and we act like we are the ultimate authorities. For me, this is most convincing argument Young makes about this whole problem of suffering.

(He says) *Humans have a great capacity for declaring something good or evil, without truly knowing* (p. 133). Sarayu (the Spirit) explains to Mack that the human choice to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil tore the universe apart. Ever since, humans have tried to play God. The only way to fix this problem, Sarayu says, is for people to **give up the right to decide what is good and evil on our own terms.**

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<sup>1</sup> From *The Shack*, pp. 125-126.

To give up. This is very difficult to do. To give up judging, to give up our authoritative stance? This point underlines the vast gulf between humans and God. It is something many of us have lost sight of. God has become so domesticated, so easy. God has become something we keep in a box; we only take God out once a week or so, for just a little while. But if God starts to get out of hand, if God begins to challenge us, then we quickly snap him back into that box. Jesus has become our friend and only our friend. The Spirit is there to answer our prayers and do our bidding. No wonder we are mixed up!

Scripture and tradition hold strongly to the notion that God is beyond our capacity to know. God's ways are not our ways. God is both fearsome AND good. God is the only true and perfect judge.

The story of Job speaks to human suffering, but it also looks at the incomprehensibility of God. Job lost everything: his home, his family, his friends, his health. He had nothing left but his faith in God.

Like Mack (in *The Shack*), Job wants to hang on to his faith, but also like Mack, he cannot help but rail against God. Job is furious! Anyone who has ever suffered greatly can understand Job's anger.

Job argues against God. Job questions God and God's judgment. God responds with "Job, do you really think you are like me? Can you honestly claim my power? Can you control good and evil? If so, then we can talk."

In the end, Job succumbs and accepts his own feeble limitations. Job finally says, "I messed up, Lord. I thought I was in charge. I was wrong. I was messing with things I had no business messing with."

**"Surely I spoke of things I did not understand."**

God is basically telling Job, "Who do you think you are? Who gets to decide what is good and what is evil?" When Job quits trying to figure everything out on his own, when Job relies on God, he is restored to his full humanity.

In the end, the question of theodicy remains. Brilliant minds (far more brilliant than ours) have been struggling with it for millennia. Perhaps we are asking the wrong questions. Perhaps we are looking for answers in the wrong places.

Perhaps we need to look to the cross.

At the foot of the cross we encounter the greatest and final response to the problem of suffering. Because it is at the cross where we see in no uncertain terms that God truly has joined with us in suffering. It is here we know there is no place so

difficult that God himself has not already gone there. In succumbing to death on the cross, Christ stands alongside us in our suffering. In joining with Christ, the Father and the Spirit grieve the most grievous loss a parent can grieve. On the cross, Christ redeems suffering once and for all.

As scripture says, "He himself was wounded, despised, rejected. Surely he has borne our grief." (Isaiah 53:35) Surely he knows what we are going through. Surely he grieves with us. Surely he aches for us. Surely he wants us to move through our suffering. Surely he wants to show us there is something beyond suffering.

There are those righteous people who, like St. Paul, say suffering is not a problem to be overcome but an opportunity to be taken advantage of. More lemonade, anyone? "... we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character, and character, hope." (Romans 5:4) A little suffering is a good thing to build character. But a LOT of suffering? Back-breaking, soul-killing suffering?

You cannot say suffering is good to someone who has lost a child to murder. You cannot say this to a country completely obliterated in disaster. You can't say this in any number of circumstances. Maybe it's something we can only say when we are on the other side of our own terrible grief. When we have walked through our own unbelievable suffering. It's something some of us will never be able to say, because we won't be tested in that way. Perhaps it can only be said by the One who walks with us, the One who was humiliated and mocked, the One who longs to lighten our load, to bear our grief.

Maybe all we can say, like Job, like Mack, is **"Surely I spoke of things I did not understand."**