

## In God's Defense

Text: Job 1:1-3:1; 4:1,7-9; 38:1-11

Hymn: "Christ, the Life of All the Living" (*LSB* 420)

A few years ago, the English comic actor Stephen Fry caused quite a stir with some remarks he made during a television interview. He was asked by the interviewer about his atheism and specifically what he would say to God if he discovered after he died that God did in fact exist. True to form for a man with a surplus of self-esteem, he launched into a tirade about all the things for which he would call God to account, all the suffering in the world that God isn't dealing with, all the terrible things that God, an omnipotent loving being, ought to be doing something about but isn't. As I say, it caused quite a stir. There was even an investigation by the Irish police into his having committed blasphemy, which until just this year was still a crime in Ireland.

Predictably, part of the reaction was a flood of articles, written both by well-meaning believers in God and by those who, though not believers themselves, thought it not a terrible idea to believe in God, offering to Stephen Fry a neat and tidy explanation of how it is that God allows suffering to happen and yet remains good.

Now such arguments are known as theodicies. And the very word should warn us, because the word "theodicy" means "justification of God." I'll spare you the details and just cut to the chase: None of them works. Theodicies can be very clever. They are put together by very intelligent people who have thought about these things very deeply. But it doesn't take more than a moderately well educated teenager who's had a few religion classes to see where the flaws are. They don't work.

And the Book of Job gives us the Biblical view on suffering, or at least, perhaps more accurate to say, it gives us one of the key views on suffering—not suffering as a whole, not the general problem of evil, but an answer of sorts as to why bad things happen to good people. When bad things happen to bad people, nobody has a problem with it. But when bad things happen to good people, that’s different.

And Job, we are told emphatically and repeatedly, was a good person. The word “integrity” crops up more than once as a key characteristic of Job. He was a man upright in heart, full of integrity. He didn’t just talk a good game. He played it too. Yet he suffers unimaginably. First, he loses all his property and in the same way all his servants. And before he’s finished hearing the news of that, he loses his children. Then sometime later he loses his health. And he does not sin against God in his speaking.

But even a man of integrity such as Job has to wonder what on earth is going on. To get the whole picture, we’d have to read the entire 42 chapters of Job, but, suffice it to say, Job is deeply upset at his situation, wishing that he hadn’t been born (3:3). Not only is he upset with the situation, he’s puzzled and disgruntled with God. He keeps saying to God, “God, I don’t deserve this. God, I haven’t done anything that requires this kind of punishment. Show me my faults or else leave me alone.” And then his friends turn out not to be quite so friendly. They tell him, “God isn’t like that. God doesn’t punish people without cause. Just own up. Confess whatever it is you’ve done and all will be well. It must make sense. Nothing comes from nothing. Nothing ever could. Somewhere in your youth you must have done something awful or else God would leave you alone” (see especially 8:1-22 and 11:1-20).

The friends, as it turns out, are the ones who are engaged in theodicy, justifying God's ways (42:7-9). And yet it's Job, the grumbler, who's blessed (Job 42:10-17). What is going on? What is going through the mind of God for Him to allow such terrible things to befall the upright man of integrity? The short answer is that it's not "nothing comes from nothing." It's not "the law of Karma: What goes around, comes around." It's not some rational philosopher's explanation of where exactly it all went wrong so you can close the case, mystery solved.

This is the temptation to which we always fall as Christians. We assume God's ways must be like our ways and we must be able to make sense of everything. God does speak, over the course of four chapters, in fact (38-41). But in none of His speaking does He offer an explanation of His conduct, a defense or a justification. He simply teaches Job humility. He says, "I'm God. You're a creature. If I needed advice, it's not you that I would turn to. What help have you ever offered me, when was I stuck and you were the solution? You are not the one to teach me." And that's enough for Job. He's reminded of his place and he repents (. Let God be God. And let the creature be the creature. When that is the case, all is well and all is good, even when things are not well and good.

But Job's sin was less serious than the sin of his friends, who had God all figured out and packaged up so that all you had to do was drive up, enter your PIN, and out came a justification for God. God never divulges his thinking to Job or to the friends. It's we the readers who are privileged to know what's going on. We have the benefit of hindsight and an explanation which Job wasn't given. Why did Job suffer? Not *despite* his integrity but *because* of it. His suffering was not God's punishment on any sin or

unrighteousness but it was God's demonstration to His enemies of Job's integrity and righteousness. "Look at my servant Job. Even when you take away all that He has, He will not curse me." "Look at my servant Job. Even when you take away his very health and drive him to the edge of despair, he will not sin against me with his lips." "Look at my servant Job. The more he suffers, the more remarkable is his righteousness."

There is an inverse proportion between Job's sufferings and his comfort but a direct proportion between his sufferings and his integrity. In our world, we think it should be the other way around. The better you are, the less you suffer. Bad things happen to bad people. Good people should get away with a comfortable life.

And in this Job sets up the scene for the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. The shameful, painful death of Jesus seemed for all intents and purposes both to his enemies who mocked him and his friends who hid from him to be a complete denial of Jesus' righteousness. It seemed proof that all that He was thought to be and claimed to be was in fact untrue, because God would not let such things happen to Him. "He trusts in God; let God deliver him." "If He's such a godly man, let's see what happens."

But we know (and again it has pleased the Holy Spirit to give us the very undeserved benefit of hindsight). The Holy Scriptures explain all this to us so that we might have faith. It was in fact the very righteousness of Christ that nailed Him to the cross—His integrity, God's own integrity in keeping His promises at whatever cost, that the promise of redemption that had already been pronounced in the Garden should not by any means be allowed to lapse. So that God would be full of integrity and Christ would be a man of integrity, Jesus suffered, the righteous for the unrighteous (1 Pet 3:8)

And so we suffer, whether it's persecution or simply the fact that Satan has a grip on this world, afflicting us with such things as war and poverty, pestilence and famine. And God permits Satan to inflict sufferings on us. We should not be surprised. That is how things are. That is what sin does. Nor should we start to put God and His judgments into a box of our own making, of justifying God. That is not for us to do. God will answer for Himself. But while we suffer and while we might even weep and be on the point of despair, like Job, we should not grumble as if something terrible and undeserved were happening to us. Nor is it that every suffering which comes our way is deserved either. That's a different kind of box to put God in, but a box all the same.

Although in Christ our sins are forgiven and now no punishment is due us on account of sin (Rom 8:1), God still allows us to suffer, as he allowed Job to suffer, that we might better learn what His grace is. So that we might have the endurance that produces character, which produces hope, which will not put us to shame (Rom 5:3-5). Christ suffered shame once for all, so that we might never be put to shame. Christ suffered rejection once for all, so that we might forever be God's beloved. Christ died that we might live.

And even as we suffer, we can follow the example of the apostles, who rejoiced in the honor of sharing in Christ's sufferings (Acts 5:41). It ended well with Job. It ended much better with Christ. And when we share His cross, we also share His resurrection. And when we share His resurrection, we will equally share His glory.

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