

Introduction

The World is full of easy answers, both religious and secular, to life's problems, chief of which is human suffering and its ultimate consummation, death. If we are having problems with our job, ministry, or family, there is no shortage of nice-sounding platitudes and confident advisors to help guide us. Their answers can skim the surface of most every form of psychological and spiritual suffering. So many theories about suffering exist that it is understandable if the modern sufferer or care-giver is overwhelmed by the choices. Of course, theories are fine until suffering visits *you*. Then, all answers seem to pale. All theories address the same nagging questions: What is the truth about suffering and divine justice? What perspective on suffering does justice to faith, reality, and my personal experience?

For Christians, the only satisfactory coping mechanism for suffering is faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus did not give an answer for suffering, but a way to live with it. His promises are more hopeful and realistic than the humanistic philosophers of our day, yet so often His liberating message is blunted. Part of our denseness is due to our aversion to the difficult questions He places before us. The stories of Job and Jesus are about human suffering and human possibilities. You won't find an ounce of propaganda or fluff in either story.

In *Where Is God when You Need Him?*, we will retell the story of Job in light of the story of Jesus and our own life story. Using a holistic, faith-story method, we will contemplate Job from a Christian personal growth perspective. We will explore how Job bears on everyday Christian actions and attitudes. We will also investigate a timeless Christian practice for experiencing God's word as personal, therapeutic, and transformational. Through the gift of *lectio divina*, each person is equipped to bring their feelings, questions, and experiences to God's word, and thereby not settle for second-hand answers.

Job is a natural starting point in any inquiry into suffering because his emotions and attitudes parallel ours. He is a model protester and pray-er for human sufferers. His values, virtues, and life vision are highly conducive to Christian growth and human development.

All suffering seems unjust or excessive in some way, and our tendency is to cry out, with the prophet Habakkuk, "Violence!"¹ It is only through the mysterious interaction of nature and grace that we can learn to repeat with Jesus, in response to the timeless temptation to enact revenge and retaliation, "Enough!"²

WHO THIS BOOK IS WRITTEN FOR

Where is God When You Need Him? is designed for sufferers, care-givers, and individuals interested in personal growth. It does not assume any familiarity with the book of Job, though it hopes to inspire enthusiasm for it. In our day, it may be particularly helpful to individuals who see themselves as Job figures in their job or vocation. Christians frequently fail to find support at the parish level when struggling with the day-to-day crosses of their employment or ministry. Many Christians turn to secular self-help and career counseling resources without considering the resources and wisdom available within their own faith tradition. Prayer, perseverance, trust in providence, and the ongoing discernment of one's vocation are Joban themes which are very relevant to modern vocational sufferers.

Where Is God When You Need Him? may have particular relevance to persons in the following groups:

Care-Givers

Job offers profound insights into the psycho-spirituality of suffering and care-giving. It dramatizes the coping language used by sufferers and care-givers. The progressive transformation of Job's life vision and consciousness reveals the stages sufferers typically pass through during the therapeutic process. Care-givers will find the positive and negative models of care-giving presented in Job particularly helpful for responding to troubled patients and families. Job is a colorful and instructive integration of spirituality, psychology, and the Kubler-Ross stages of death and dying.

Twelve-Step Program Participants And Care-Givers

Participants and care-givers in the various twelve-step programs will recognize the following values which play a central role in Job: reconciliation, honesty, integrity, humility, and the need for a higher power.

Persons Hurt By Religious Individuals and Institutions

Throughout history, religion has been used for both constructive and destructive purposes. In modern society, the suffering caused by religious individuals and institutions is highlighted and frequently exploited. However, such blaming does not remove the pain, and the hurt remains.

Job is a story that can accelerate the healing process in two ways. First, it portrays both the positive and negative aspects of religion in an objective, though exaggerated,

manner. The author exposes the limitations of human wisdom and religious dogmas, and the damage that can result from an overzealous and insensitive application of these principles. He balances this with an example of an integrated religious person (Job) who remains faithful and virtuous amid tremendous suffering. Second, the story presents reconciliation and compassion as the constitutive elements of authentic religious practice. It challenges persons of all faiths to forgive those who have hurt them, no matter how deep the pain.

Persons critical of religion may find some of their deepest thoughts and emotions expressed eloquently and forcefully by Job. For those willing to ask hard questions of God, religion, and themselves, serious reflection on Job in the context of one's life experiences can be an opportunity for reconciliation with God, others, and life itself.

Persons Angry At God

Our modern age may psychoanalyze those who get angry or distressed with God, but the author of Job knows better. Properly channeled anger can stimulate personal growth and communication with God. We can best comprehend this anger by viewing it in the context of human relationships. Anger at God is similar to the anger we experience towards human beings we love, and on whom we place certain expectations. Anger is a sign that we care, and that some aspect or value of the relationship has been disturbed. It is a dynamic opportunity for a deeper understanding and relationship with God, neighbor, and ourselves. It holds great constructive and destructive potential, the fulfillment of which is dependent on the individual.

The book of Job gives the sufferer permission to express his or her deepest and darkest emotions to God. This can be an extremely cathartic and therapeutic experience. Keeping negative emotions and experiences bottled up within us is a ticket to health problems. Expressing them in a violent manner towards ourselves (e.g., substance abuse and suicide) or others (i.e., through acts of vengeance, bitterness, or withdrawal) is mentally, physically, and spiritually destructive. The reader will discover in Job a middle path that encourages the ventilation of negative experiences and emotions in a constructive manner while promoting hope in God's willingness to heal these in His own time.

THE BOOK OF SUFFERING

The Bible artfully avoids the extremes of nihilism (life is meaningless), rationalization (suffering can be explained), and spiritualization (religion or spirituality can provide simple answers to complex mysteries). It has not been called "the book of suffering" for

nothing. As we will see, Job's problem starts when he is afflicted "for nothing," and because he was good "for nothing."³