

The Society of Sufferers

By Chris Lash

They stood there, naked, ashamed, holding the fruit, unbelief polluting their souls, the very bowels shaped by the Beloved digesting the forbidden, Adam and Eve experienced sin. Our first parents suffered greatly, for they knew the weight of the garden lost.¹ But with that, suffering was introduced into the human existence. No longer would life be characterized by delightful conversations with the Divine. The great commonality of all mankind shifted from a vibrant relationship with the Creator to death, pain, toil, and suffering. The society of sufferers asks for no dues, no pledges, its membership include all who have a heartbeat.

This society is not reserved for only faithless unbelievers. The underlying assumption is that hating and cursing God results in suffering while remaining faithful to Yahweh results in incredible flourishing. However, Scripture does not attest to that. Scripture flies in the face of prosperity theology and declares that world-shattering suffering occurs to the faithless and faithful alike. Traditionally, this question has been framed, *why do the righteous suffer?*² In the pages that follow, we shall trace the suffering of the righteous through Job, Psalm 73, John the Baptizer, Jesus, and then examine the end of suffering.

At the outset the author is sure to tell us Job was an extraordinary man. He was “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (Job 1:1).³ Job epitomizes a man who is righteous, wise, and hates injustice.⁴ “This man was the greatest of all

¹ Genesis 2 and 3. For the duration of this paper, all the verses will be taken from the ESV unless otherwise specified.

² For the purpose of this paper, I have included the term *faithful witness* to further nuance the believer’s active participation of worshipping Yahweh.

³ To call Job “blameless and upright” is to echo the blamelessness of Noah in Genesis 6:9 and Abraham in Genesis 17:1. Additionally, to fear the Lord is a refrain peppered throughout Scripture expressing ultimate wisdom.

⁴ David J. A. Clines, *Job 1-20*, ed. David A. Hubbard, *et al.* (Word Biblical Commentary) (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 12. Clines asserts that the author is not concerned with issues of sinlessness and perfection but rather “...the issues of the book are posed in the simple terms of innocence and guilt, suffering deserved and undeserved, and do not become entangled in niceties about gradations of sinfulness or righteousness.”

the people of the east” (Job 1:3). Job is a faithful witness in how he leads his family, lives his life, and worships.

The reader is then transported to the convened heavenly council where Satan and God dialogue regarding Job. God authenticates the assertion that Job is “blameless and upright” and further calls Job “my servant” indicating God himself acknowledges his humble service (Job 1:8).⁵ Satan responds by attacking Job’s motivation for loving God. “Of course he loves you, look at all you have given him!” He challenges that Job’s love is cheap; should God take away all the prosperity Job will curse God.⁶ God then allows Satan to have his way with His servant.

This is where the story gets extremely tough. The audience then watches in horror as Satan wastes no time ravaging Job’s life. Sebeans from the south kill his servants, oxen, and donkeys; fire from God consumes the servants and sheep from the west; Chaldeans from the north steal the camels and kill his servants; the Sirocco winds blow to the east collapsing the houses of his children, killing them all.⁷ Satan then devastates Job’s health. Everything Job held dear is stripped from his grasp. All he can do is sit and lament.

The next thirty-five chapters consist of Job lamenting, cursing the day he was born, and his arrogant friends indicting Job for claiming innocence. Surely, they conclude, if Job is suffering he must have done something to anger God.⁸ Their theological framework only sees obedience rewarded with prosperity and disobedience punished with suffering.⁹ “Although they

⁵ John E. Hartey, *The Book of Job*, New International Commentary on The Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 73. “With this title Yahweh was acknowledging that Job was a faithful, obedient follower. Moreover, Yahweh affirmed that Job was truly a righteous man by stating that he was *blameless and upright, one who fears God and shuns evil*. Yahweh hereby authenticated the opening characterization of Job.”

⁶ Satan is incredibly accusatory when addressing God. He bombards God with imperatives *telling* God to remove His favor from Job. Ibid., 76.

⁷ Ibid., 77

⁸ Ironically, God later says to one of Job’s friends, “My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (42:7).

⁹ While it is true that in Leviticus 26 God promises blessing for Israel when they obey but discipline in disobedience, the book of Job testifies that this framework for suffering is way too simplistic. Suffering does not always mean punishment and discipline. Cotterell comments, “Leviticus 26 promises a life of plenty, lived in harmony with nature, as a reward for obedience to the covenant, but threatens illness, family and calamity as a

were trying to defend God, their reductionistic theology ends up offering Job a temptation: to confess sins that weren't there in order to try and retrieve his prosperity... Their counsel, if followed, would have actually led Job *away* from the Lord..."¹⁰ Job adamantly maintains his blamelessness claiming that he does not deserve to be suffering as he is (Job 7:20; 27:5).¹¹

In Job continually asserting his innocence he takes it one step too far and arrogantly challenges God to exonerate Himself for His injustice (31:35-37; 27:2-6).¹² Answering Job's call for a trial, God again steps on the scene. (Surely now Job will get all his questions answered and he will know the reason for his suffering.) God personally responds "out of the whirlwind" (38:1) and instructs Job to "Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me" (38:2). Each question God puts forth shows Job his finite and limited ability compared to the mighty, creative, all-powerful Sustainer.¹³ Job's only response is to vow to stay silent (40:3-5) and later he retracts his demand, finding comfort in this God (42:6).¹⁴

Job's world fell apart.¹⁵ Job, the faithful servant, the one whom God called "*my* servant," had his life dismantled by Satan allowed by God. Neither the author nor God is concerned with answering the "why" question. We know that Job's suffering was not connected to punishment

punishment for disobedience. However this punishment is intended to bring Israel to repentance." F.P. Cotterell. "Suffering," In *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Eds. T. Desmond Alexander, *et al.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000): 803, [802-806].

¹⁰ D. A. Carson, *How Long O Lord?: Reflections on Suffering and Evil*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1991), 156.

¹¹ Carson comments: "Job does not claim sinless perfection. He simply argues that any conceivable sin he may have committed does not justify being made a target of the Almighty." *Ibid.*, 143-144.

¹² *Ibid.*, 156.

¹³ "The tables have been turned. Job, the questioner, is being questioned. Building on the evidence just given, Yahweh asks Job a penetrating question that pinpoints the implication of his complaint. That is, in advocating the righteousness of his own position so tenaciously, Job has implied that God needs to be corrected." Hartey, *Job*, 515.

¹⁴ Goldingay quotes Newsom: "One of the characteristics of acute suffering is its tendency to obliterate all other experience. It can become almost impossible to see, hear, or feel anything beyond one's own suffering, as though that suffering were all that existed in the world. In such a situation, images of God that stress the intimate, personal quality of God, likening God to one who suffers with the grieving, may not be what is needed. What one craves is the reassurance that one's own suffering is *not* the whole of reality." John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Faith*, vol. 2, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 622.

¹⁵ In the end, God restores and doubles Job's fortunes and blesses him with more children (42:12-17). Job dies at the ripe old age of 140, "an old man, and full of days" (42:17). Job was restored but his scars remained.

for sin, human persecution, discipline, a capriciousness in God, or a lapse in God's omnipotence. We are simply told that Job is innocent and the innocent still suffer.

Asaph has a similar crisis of faith as he sees the wicked prosper. "[Psalm 73] is a man's confession whereby he reveals his struggle for a living communion of faith with his God, a struggle which brings him to the verge of despair."¹⁶ The psalm brings the main problem to the forefront by stating the problematic proverb; "Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart" (73:1). This was the source of his discontentment—his crisis is faith.¹⁷ This is made clear in the next verse.

"But as for me," he emphatically states in verse two, "me feet had almost stumbled...For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (73:2-3). From the past tense phrases Asaph uses, he is clearly looking back and reflecting on his crisis. Asaph knew that God was good to Israel, however his experience told him otherwise. How could God still be good while the wicked are prospering? Do not miss this; this is an angst filled question—not one reserved for ivory towers.

Asaph shows us the reality of this question as he unpacks the ways in which he saw the wicked prosper in verses 4-12. Mockingly, he states that they do not suffer like the rest of mankind (v. 5). Audaciously, they wear their pride around like a necklace, proud of their pride (v. 5).¹⁸ These people are covered with violence as if it were their clothes (v. 6). Flippantly they threaten to oppress (v. 8). They speak against God, "their slanderous tongue stops at nothing."¹⁹

¹⁶ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans. Herbert Hartwell, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1962), 507.

¹⁷ Tate stresses that this is not just an individual question but is a problem for all those who are "pure in heart." Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, eds. Bruce M. Metzger, *et al.*, Word Biblical Commentary (Columbia: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 235.

¹⁸ Weiser, *Psalms*, 509.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

“They fail to see the perversity of their behavior.”²⁰ They know there is a God but do not particularly care, believing “God does not take any notice of what goes on.”²¹

Now, therefore, Asaph recounts that he saw everything as hopeless. His continual attempt to remain close to his God was worthless if God does not actually care about the torment of the righteous. He remembers, “All in vain have I kept my heart clean” (v. 13).²² However, he kept his mouth shut because it would undermine the faith of his community.²³

Asaph, a leader in his community deeply struggled with recognizing the faithfulness of God. This faithful witness, blameless one, one who is pure in heart could not see how God was good while the wicked prospered. “Until,” he goes on in verse 17, “I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.” This verse stands in the middle of the whole psalm further emphasizing the enormous shift in Asaph’s thinking. We do not know what he saw, heard, or encountered while in the sanctuary of God however, we know that God met him somehow. After Asaph communed with the Divine, his crisis of faith shifted into adoration of the Almighty.

Asaph then projects the sufferings he experienced onto the future doom of the wicked (vv. 18-20). Asaph sees the future hope of God enacting complete justice using powerful language in verse 20, “Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.” Tate comments regarding verse 20, “the wicked who seem so prosperous and stable can disappear as quickly as a dream and have no more real substance than the ‘mere images’ of a troublesome dream.”²⁴ He now has a new perspective. He confesses his embittered soul (vv. 21-22) and then confesses his renewed faith in his God (vv. 23-26).

Sandwiching the psalm between two sets of proverbs, the proverb in verse 1 and 27-28, psalm 73

²⁰ Ibid., 510.

²¹ Goldingay, *Israel’s Faith*, 407.

²² “The psalmist can claim such innocence: not sinless, of course, but the innocence of a relatively righteous person of honorable life.” Ibid., 407.

²³ Ibid., 408

²⁴ Tate, *Psalms*, 230.

ends the way it began, forming an inclusio. The difference is that this time Asaph truly believes that God is greater than the wicked, He cares about the suffering, He will punish the wicked, and “it is good to be near to God” (73:28).²⁵

Asaph had to confront a similar question that assuredly ran through Job’s mind, “How is God good when the righteous suffer? Are not the faithful witnesses let off the hook of suffering?” God’s response changed both of their hearts and forced a paradigm change in their thinking. Both men learned that their understanding of divine goodness is not prosperity but presence.²⁶ Both men saw that God rescues not from but in their suffering. Both have learned to rest in the sovereignty of God (Job 42:2; Ps. 73:28). Both men lamented their way into deeper faith. Both men sat in anguish at enduring the desecration of *shalom* and cried for a future rid of suffering’s grasp.²⁷

The experience of suffering is not unique to the Older Testament, the Newer Testament attests that John the Baptizer, the forerunner for Jesus, had the same longing for shalom, proclaiming the Messiah will come in fire to establish God’s kingdom. For his preaching, however, John was thrown in prison by Herod (Mt. 4:12; 14:3; Lk. 3:19-20). Confused because he is still in prison he sent word to Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come or should we expect another?” Jesus responded by quoting Isaiah 61:1-2 and 35:4-6 but left off the portion about the

²⁵ Bruggemann uses a rubric of reorientation regarding Asaph’s shift. He sees three reorientations: first, the reorientation of the wicked, second the new understanding of self, and third a reorientation towards the presence of God. Walter Bruggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: a theological commentary*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1984), 19-20.

²⁶ Tate, *Psalms*, 232.

²⁷ Plantinga has one of the best explanations of *shalom*. “The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*. We call it peace, but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, *shalom* means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight*—a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creature in whom he delights. *Shalom*, in other words, is the way things ought to be.” Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not The Way It’s Supposed To Be: A Breviary of Sin*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 10.

prisoners being set free.²⁸ Jesus essentially responds, “There is no doubt that I am the messiah. John, you will die in prison. But John, do not lose faith.” For now, faithful witnesses still suffer under injustice.²⁹

The suffering of the blameless, the prospering of the wicked, and eschatological hopes are all tied up in the story of Jesus. The incarnation and the cross reveal that He identifies with humanity and shares with our sufferings, though He was blameless.³⁰ Further, the cross is the pinnacle of wickedness’s limited prospering. It was there that corrupted mankind voted to kill the Messiah, receiving back to themselves a murderer over the restorer of *shalom* (Mt. 27:20). That day, wickedness indicted the good, innocent God-man and delighted in seeing Him destroyed.

The newer testament reveals that Jesus stands as our eschatological hope. The final unraveling of suffering as seen in our eschatological hope encompasses, but is not limited to, the destruction of the wicked, vindication of the righteous, and the total restoration of *shalom*.³¹ Jesus’ resurrection revealed that wickedness does not triumph and since our God is alive, Christ will return and as Revelation 19 reveals He shall tread the unrighteous under the winepress of His fury, fully liberating His people.³² The arrogant and wicked will finally be “swept away” and despised “as phantoms” in a dream (Ps. 73:20).

Not only will the wicked see ultimate destruction but also the righteous will be vindicated. Those who have been put down will be raised up and seated with Him. John sees this

²⁸ David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 291.; Leon Morris. *The Gospel According to Matthew*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 277.; John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 332.

²⁹ Some may object to the use of John in talking about innocent suffering because his suffering was directly linked to persecution from his preaching. However, it seems appropriate to include the theme of God not delivering His faithful witnesses from suffering but through it.

³⁰ “We look to the cross not only as an act of redemption, but also as a revelation of God’s identification with humanity...he actively shares in our sufferings.” Cotterell, “Suffering,” 804.

³¹ The full restoration of *shalom* most certainly includes realized fellowship with the Almighty. That is the greatest eschatological hope.

³² See Revelation 19:15.

in Revelation 20:4 when he records that the ones without heads, beheaded for being a witness for Jesus, will be raised up to rule, or be-head, with Jesus. There is even a foretaste of this in the epilogue of Job when God restores Job to greater than his former glory. Those who have been made like Christ through the fires of suffering (Rom. 8:17) will be, probably publically, counted as His whereby all accusations will be seen as fraudulent.

Wrapped up in this is the total restoration of shalom, that which Job, Asaph, and John the Baptizer all yearned for and looked forward to. God will ultimately, once again, dwell with man and all suffering, pain, toil, misery, and injustice shall be forever deported. There shall be universal flourishing, abundance, and delight in our God as His glory is fully revealed.³³ At that time, the glory of the Lord will be intimately known and shall be laid so thick on the earth “as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14). Suffering will be wholly undone and replaced with shalom.

Though this stands tangent to the intention to this paper, it must be at least mentioned that the New Testament writers understand suffering as a necessary component to being conformed to the image of Christ (1 Pt. 4:14; Phil. 3:5-11; Rom. 8:17; Heb. 12:3ff.). In suffering He draws near and gives us Himself, in the person of Jesus.

The biblical witnesses have attested that the righteous still see affliction. Job, Asaph, John the baptizer, and Jesus saw suffering and therefore scripture testifies that in this life, suffering will still make us bleed, cry, mourn, and hurt. But, we have hope, hope and assurance that frees us to lament and understand that God will bring shalom to the earth thereby transforming the society of sufferers into the fellowship of the flourishing.

³³ Plantinga, *Not The Way It's Supposed To Be*, 10.