

Job and Smallpox: Lessons for Ethical Meaning-Making Out of Suffering

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*“For we were born only yesterday and know nothing,
and our days on earth are but a shadow.”*

Job 8:9

The story of Job often holds an outsized place in the minds of biblically-minded people who are struggling with suffering – their own or that of a loved one. Almost as if it speaks directly to our fears, it answers us with the sweet balm of encouragement, purpose, and confidence. The story of Job – dramatic and graphic as it is at points – tells us that suffering is not final, that injustice will not ultimately stand, that there is an Intelligence and Purpose in the mechanisms of the universe beyond our reckoning, that we can rely on the universe to be, in the end, fair and good. Who wouldn’t find that good news in the midst of trial and tribulation? A recent popular study guide read: “The Book of Job is, in the end, a morality tale designed to show that people must trust in God, even in the face of adversity, because everything happens for a purpose.” Except....

That it is a gross misreading of the story. It is historically and textually inaccurate, and a disservice to the genuineness of suffering humans experience. I do not wish to remove anyone’s emotional support, believe me. At the same time, I am wary of how crutches have been wielded as weapons (consciously and unconsciously) that harm rather than heal. They sometimes deny an uncomfortable truth for the short-term benefit of a patina of peace. There is an ethical issue at stake here for people who would be guiding the meaning-making of others in difficult circumstances.

Whether or not the Bible is authoritative for you personally, you will almost certainly come into contact with someone for whom it is. Re-

ardless, the story of Job offers an important object lesson for all of us about ethical meaning-making in the face of unnecessary suffering. Allow me to spin a yarn for a moment.

For those unfamiliar with the story, Job is a “blameless,” God-fearing man – which is important for the plot-line. (Only two people in the Bible are thought to have never sinned: Jesus and Job.) For some reason (reasons differ, depending on the version or revision one reads), Job experiences a series of tragedies: first losing all his property, then his wife and children suffer and die, and then he suffers extraordinary physical agony himself. His friends and authorities argue why this must be happening to Job – did he sin? did he lose faith? should he repent? What did he do to deserve such punishment? All the while, Job professes both his innocence and his faith (which are essential for the point of the story – if he really *had* sinned, even unknowingly, then there would be no plot). Job never “blames” or curses God, despite all the suffering. “Though God slay me, yet will I hope in God” (13:15), and “God knows the way that I take; when God has tested me, I will come forth as gold,” Job says, confidently (23:10). Job endures until the end, when God restores him to health, replaces his property, and provides a new wife and children – twice as much and as many as before... as if that makes everything alright. Even-steven. No harm no foul. (Obviously, the story was not written from the perspective of his first wife and kids!)

But then, right at the end, Job asks God *Why?* And this is where things get *really* uncomfortable.

You see, in ancient Southwest Asia, this type of story was fairly common. It circulated in varied versions among most of the civilizations and cultures of the region. Some noble, undeserving figure would suffer extraordinary and unjust things, in the end being restored and blessed, with the natural justice of the universe affirmed. Suffering, these stories told their audiences, only *seems* like suffering, or only *appears* to be unjust – really, on the whole, the universe is fair... we just cannot see it from our limited viewpoint sometimes. Take heart; stay the course. Rich rewards await those who endure difficulties, exploitation, injustice, and privation. Everything is the way it was meant to be: everything has a purpose. So, really, what you are experiencing isn't ‘bad’ at all. (Or, certainly not as ‘bad’ as it appears to us in our provincial perspective.) You see? Doesn't that make you feel better? (Again, cold comfort for Job's wife, kids, and livestock.)

Every *other* version of the story ends this same sort of way: things are put right so everything is good. No worries, people! Suffering isn't *really* suffering, if seen from a larger perspective. It is just a brief episode on the path to paradise. Just look at it differently!

But the story of Job has a twist. Job gets to do what we all want to do: ask God *Why? How* is that fair? ("I really liked my first wife, God, and was kinda sweet on some of those kids. Sure, the new ones are great and all, but did the first lot really have to suffer and die?") And, surprisingly, the authors of the biblical story have God answer. And the whole story turns on its head as a result.

God responds with offense: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements – surely you know!" (38:4-5). In other words: Who are you to question me? You know nothing! How dare you question the meaning of the universe – you presume the universe *has* meaning! God mocks Job: "On what were the earth's bases sunk, or who laid the cornerstone?"

The easy interpretation here is that Job just doesn't see the moral arc of the universe the way God does – *that's* why Job doesn't understand. Job's job (and thus ours by moral proxy) is to remain faithful, even in the face of suffering. God ultimately has our back. That's the easy interpretation.

There is this little snag in the narrative, however. After God spends four chapters excoriating Job for his presumption to question the course of the universe, God turns to Job's friends who all the while had been making the case (in various ways) that what was happening to Job ought to make some kind of sense. They were, in their own way, defending God, saying God had to be fair, so Job must deserve it somehow or maybe it isn't all that bad. God lays into them, saying that *Job* was correct this whole time (Job was saying that he did not deserve the suffering, that what was happening was *not* right). His friends were flat wrong: "you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has done" (42:8).

So – and lean in on this with me – Job was correct that whole time, saying that the suffering and misfortune didn't make sense, and his friends (who were trying to make sense of the suffering) were wrong.

Job comes out the hero, of course (he suffered, after all) – but not because he denied the suffering. His friends wanted to explain the evil away, deny it, say it wasn't really evil (it just appeared to be), the universe is a fair

place, God is a just god, blah-blah-blah. But Job said: “No, this does not make sense. It is not right. This is horrible.” In the end, Job is vindicated.

This is deeply disorientating. It makes the biblical version of this story virtually unique in ancient West Asian literature. The story goes along just as everyone would expect and then, in the end, it refuses to paint a pretty picture, refuses to say that what happened was OK, was fair, was just. God admits as much by praising Job and rebuking his friends. The book of Job – if we read it all the way to the end – implies that the universe does *not* ‘make sense.’ It is essentially amoral. The universe is not always fair.

The book of Job, then, becomes a long commentary on our *desire* for the world to make sense – our psychological predisposition or need to assume a fairness in the world. We respond to fortune and misfortune as if it were the natural consequence of something we have done or some part of a greater divine plan.

This tendency to invest a sense of fairness into reality might be rooted in early childhood experiences, when we are raised in families, relationships, and cultures that are constructed (more or less) around the idea of natural consequences, justice, just desserts, crime and punishment, and all that. It might be encoded into our neurology after millions of years as a social species. The reason we get angry at cheaters prospering is because we feel like they *shouldn't* prosper, shouldn't win. Conservative religious figures will blame hurricanes on the moral failure of the affected regions. We see migrant farmers toiling away in the sun and unreflectively assume that they made poor decisions in their lives and we deserve the fortunate situation we are in. And so on. We humans naturally have a sense of fairness built into us. (Not just humans. Other primates exhibit a native sense of fairness. Even my cats know when one of them gets fed and not the others. They will whine and follow me until justice is done.)

However, if we really come to terms with it, the world *is* amoral. Tragedies befall the good and the bad. Fortune crowns those who deserve it and those who do not. We like to tell the story differently, but the success of Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and Paul Allen has just as much to do with chance as with any intention or hard work on their part. The world is nonsensical. We do not often recognize that this is the world we inhabit, but that is the influence of our minds and expectations, not the natural order of the cosmos.

Most of the time, meaningfulness and purpose and justice and fairness are the unspoken principles of the vast majority of our lived experience. (Take traffic laws, for example. We follow the rules so passively that we live as though the rules exist independently of us. Every day. And we *want* everyone to believe that those rules are not up to individual abrogation! Rules don't work if they're optional.)

Only on rare occasions are we thrust into an undeniable recognition of the essential senselessness of the universe: tragedy, suffering, facing death – our own or that of a loved one – and so on. These experiences bring us face-to-face with the disturbing realization that the cosmos is not friendly, not purposeful, not intelligent or fair. It isn't necessarily *against* us, either. The universe doesn't care. Caring (or not-caring) is a fiction peculiar to our minds. When this foundation to how we live and breathe and move in the world is shown to be sand, that we have built our castles in the clouds, a great deal in us that seemed firm comes crashing down. Even then, the universe continues spinning and expanding regardless – our crashing consciousness is inconsequential either way.

This is, perhaps, one of the ways to understand what spiritual distress is. The amorality and insignificance of our existence is laid bare, and everything is shaken. If nothing makes sense, then nothing makes sense. At these times, words often fail. (Language is contingent and constructed, too. The bottom falls out of our presumption that we can depend on anything. For a time, even the underpinnings of language are untethered and loose.)

Job was the only honest one in the story. In the end, everyone who tried to make sense of the tragedies or make Job feel better were Divinely declared wrong. The friends that said misfortune is the just result of sin and that God punishes the wicked were wrong. The friend who said Job's complaints and claims of innocence actually undermine religion was wrong. The one who said the suffering was to make something good was wrong. The friend who said Job should change his ways was wrong. Even God does not attempt to claim that creation makes sense. God's 129-verse long screed in reply to Job reads differently in light of this confession. The insanity is not in Job's umbrage at God. The insanity is the idea that the universe should correspond to human notions of justice and fairness at all.

This is bitter medicine. This is hard news. It does not square with how we see the world – normally. In fact, this ending was so uncomfortable that later editors probably inserted the last paragraph where Job's good for-

tune is doubled, and they also might have written in a backstory to justify Job's suffering as God 'testing' him. We have to make the happy ending that makes the world seem right again. We just can't seem to let senselessness be the end of the story! (Compare box office returns from Hollywood Rom-Coms versus any Ingmar Bergman film.)

But, maybe sometimes we should.

There is another element to this tale worth lifting up. Job is often pictured as the stoic, unshaken, resolved and faithful figure of supreme confidence in God's justice. Clearly, the bit about 'confidence in God's justice' is a deliberate (or even unconscious) re-cast of the story to make it more palatable to our human need to sense fairness. But the 'unshaken' reputation is also undeserved and unhelpful.

As early as chapter three (a mere 35 verses in), Job curses the day he was born. Later, he continues to complain: my suffering is undeserved and without end! "I loathe my life," he groans for 22 verses in a row in chapter 10. "I am a laughingstock!" He cries out in anger, anguish, and despondent prayer: Make sense of *this*, God! "My spirit is broken," he says. "How long will you torment me?" Other people who don't deserve it are living well, while I am broken!

Reading through Job's responses to his friends reads like a script for most people in the midst of tragedy, trauma, and spiritual distress. The writer of this story put on Job's lips words of unimaginable pain. That they ring so true to our experience today demonstrates the deeply human phenomenon of spiritual distress. Job should be essential reading for anyone interested in working in this field – not because we necessarily believe in the Bible and not because we want a happy ending, but rather because it articulates the personal experience of spiritual distress from the inside, with an intimacy we rarely encounter in our happiness-addicted civilization. It also provides an understanding of how hollow conventional justifications sound – the platitudes or ham-handed attempts at soothing – when held up against the jarring reality of inexpressible tragedy.

Holding in mind the real gift of the book of Job is surprisingly hard. Our whole being revolts, so deeply is "fairness" written into our interpretation of the world. However, you will hear Job's words when sitting with people who are enduring profound loss, for whom the foundation of reality has been torn away.

The Smallpox Fallacy

There is, unfortunately, a common logical fallacy that clouds good judgment when struggling to find meaning in the midst of suffering. Humans seem hardwired to find meaning in things. That is a beautiful quality! Especially when that impulse seeks to transmute suffering into something valuable or informative that a person can take with them, this seems to be a natural healing mechanism our species depends on. We cannot help but try to find a 'silver lining,' make lemonade from lemons, find the good in the bad. We are creative enough to do it, too. We *do* create good out of bad.

Too often, though, then we then turn to 'the bad' and feel the need to say it wasn't bad after all. "If we have this 'good' that we have fashioned, and that only could have resulted from the experience we had, then that experience must also have been 'good.'" I find this line of reasoning dangerous and potentially abusive.

Allow me to illustrate this with an example I borrow from Dr. C. Robert Mesle, a professor of ethics and philosophy from my undergraduate alma mater. The human world was wracked for thousands of years by smallpox. This disease caused incalculable suffering and loss. It was, without a doubt, a 'bad' thing. It was, however, entirely eradicated from the planet with the development and deployment of a smallpox vaccine. Eliminating smallpox is definitely a 'good' thing. The whole world benefits from the invention and use of the smallpox vaccine. Since the smallpox vaccine is 'good,' and we wouldn't have the vaccine without smallpox, does that therefore mean that smallpox was actually 'good?'

You see the dilemma. How can we say a result of a thing is good, while the thing itself is bad? Does the goodness of the outgrowth change or outweigh the badness of the original problem it overcame?

We often describe how we acquired strengths or insights or perspectives through trials and struggles that we otherwise couldn't imagine ourselves finding. It is so tempting, therefore, to view the struggles as themselves good or worthwhile. (Thinking of suffering as 'necessary' is a facet of this attempt at the redemption of suffering.) We might point to a child learning to walk (good) by falling down (bad). By this logic, however, a father who wants more good for his child should push his child down as often as he can while that little one is learning to walk. This is absurd, of course – no one would see that as kind or good. (Falling is really not necessarily bad, even – it just *is*. I use it here in this way to illustrate a point.)

I learned more from failing a particular exam in college than if I had passed it, true. But does that mean the F was 'good?' Should I have sought *more* Fs, so I could learn *more*? How much knowledge did I deny myself by struggling to get good grades?!

My wife and I learn more about our own individual psychologies and our shared relationship when we do not see eye to eye, even coming to a heated argument. Is marital strife actually good? Should I deliberately pick fights and try to argue more? Of course not.

Defeating Hitler and liberating the extermination camps was good. But no one will argue that Hitler was therefore actually a good man, and the extermination camps not profoundly evil.

Here is the rub. There is no logical necessity that our ability to create good from bad means that the bad was in fact good to begin with. We should **allow ourselves and others the ability to call a bad thing 'bad,' even while acknowledging that we are able to create a good thing from the experience.**

Humans are surprisingly good at making meaning out of suffering. This is a wonderful and valuable capacity. However, it does not follow that we should therefore call the suffering 'good.' Call a spade a spade. Allow evil to be known as evil. Allow suffering and injustice and absurdity to be just that. We can grow from it, surely. But our growth does not undo the injustice or necessitate us to endorse that thing.

Naturally, when working with individuals in distress, we should not be dissecting their comfort mechanisms or the logic of their belief systems. That would not be appropriate or compassionate. In this work, we are not to impose our beliefs on others, even if we might personally disagree. If someone finds comfort in believing an event or experience to be good or meaningful or to have been necessary, so be it!

However, if someone seems to be struggling, perhaps feeling unconsciously beholden or forced to call the suffering 'good' in order to grow from it, recognizing the smallpox fallacy might be tremendously helpful for you and beneficial for them. We do not have to say that what happened was good, in order to find good in our recovery from it. Like Job, we can let the bad be 'bad.' No need to back-peddle or obfuscate or soften or deny anything. Free the individual to embrace the goodness of their own growth, without having to deny the genuineness of their suffering.

Companionship

Job's companions were not all bad. They were well-meaning, even if they were conventional and unimaginative. But they had one quality that, in my estimation, redeems them forever. When each of his three friends heard of Job's misfortunes, they set out to comfort and console him. When they finally found him – hardly recognizable, so distorted was he from his suffering – they tore their own robes as he had and sat in the dirt with him. They sat with him on the ground for *seven* days and nights before ever speaking a word of advice or consolation to him. For a full week, they simply listened to him and witnessed his grief. Only after this long time of nonjudgmental companionship were they able to appreciate how great his suffering was.

We can learn from their example. We do not need to run to justifications or excuses or palliatives that deny the genuineness of the pain, the unfairness, the non-sensical-ness, the horrific, hurtful insanity of it. Those denials are distractions at best and harmful at worst. One of the insights that might be gained is that experiences do not have to make sense to hurt, and the confrontation with a non-purposeful reality is part of the struggle and pain of spiritual distress. Denying it or acting as if that starkness is not real does not help people who are experiencing it. So, most of the tired, old lines just do not work. The prayer God answered, in the end, was Job's heartfelt, sincere denial of easy answers.

For all their faults, these were good friends who stuck with Job and listened far more than they spoke. I hope, when I am in sackcloth and ashes, I have similar companions who allow me to simply be in my grief for a good, long while. There is truth there.

