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GOD'S SCANDAL in the Book of Job

by Jiří Moskala

The innocent suffering of Job presents the most notorious and significant objection to a belief in the goodness and fairness of God. I totally disagree with Bart Ehrman, who states: "God himself caused the misery, pain, agony, and loss that Job experienced. . . . And to what end? For 'no reason'—other than to prove to the Satan that Job wouldn't curse God even if he had every right to do so. . . . God did this to him in order to win a bet with the Satan. . . . But God is evidently above justice and can do whatever he pleases if he wants to prove a point."¹ What God allows He does not cause or do. The biblical text reveals that it was Satan who brought on Job's calamities and not God (Job 1:12; 2:6–7). God is the Creator of life and created everything very good (Gen 1:31). Evil comes from another source (Matt 13:38–39). Is the author of the book of Job intending to answer the question of why the innocent suffer, as it is usually asserted? Is it a story about a bet between God and Satan; about who is right and will win?

The most crucial issue in the book is not Job's suffering, even though his suffering plays an important role in the whole drama, nor is it about a capricious bet between God and Satan in front of the sons of God. What is the primary issue explained in this cosmic scenario of the great controversy between good and evil? According to Job's prologue (1:8; 2:3), God proclaims Job just in front of the solemn

assembly gathered before Him. Twice in the first two chapters, God declares Job to be right, i.e., blameless, upright, fearing God, and shunning evil. His character is without question, but not because he is sinless (Job knows he is a sinner; see, for example, 7:21; 10:6; 14:17). He can be blameless only through God's transforming grace. In these two encounters initiated by God, God directs His words to Satan and engages him in heightened dialogue.

God is depicted as passionately standing up for Job, but Satan does not share God's loving affection for Job. Instead, Satan uses Job to go to the very root of his dispute with God by a frightful and seemingly innocent question: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9 NIV). To understand Satan's investigation, it is necessary to study the key words in the question: "for nothing" (the Hebrew term for this occurs four times in the book: 1:9; 2:3; 9:17; 22:6). It can be translated also as "gratis," "gratuitously," "without a reason," "for nought," "freely," "disinterestedly," "for no purpose," "in vain," "without cause." Satan's question can be stated thus: Does Job serve God disinterestedly? Is his piety unselfish and devotion wholehearted? Or expressed differently: Does he serve God out of love, i.e., for nothing?

This cynical inquiry introduces the whole plot of the book, because Satan categorically denies that God is just while justifying Job and proclaiming

him perfect. Job's motives are under his scrutiny, and he claims that they are not pure but selfish. At first glance, the remark appears to be directed against Job, but in reality it is an attack upon God by trying to disprove His statement about Job. Thus the main theme of the book of Job is God's justice, the trustworthiness of His word. The real drama turns on the fact that God is for Job and proclaims him just.

At stake in the cosmic controversy is the ultimate question of whether or not God can be trusted and if His judgments are valid. Is God just while justifying us? In front of the whole Universe, it must be demonstrated that God is the God of love, truth, and justice, and that He is the guarantor of freedom. If His word is not trustworthy, God's whole government will collapse.

Why is Satan's question so evil? When the motives of Job's behavior are questioned, he cannot immediately defend himself. Only a long period of time and the difficulties of life will reveal who is correct. In order to prove that Job's motives are impure, Satan demands that God allow him to take everything from Job, because only in this way will God see the real Job: "He will surely curse you to your face" (v. 11 NIV), so God responds: "Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands" (v. 12 NIV).

God's answer irritates me. I do not like it. We naturally revolt against such a reaction by God. Those who believe

in a good, loving, just, and all-powerful God have an immense problem with this picture of Him. Believers confess that the Creator and the King of the Universe is the Protector of life, Giver of happiness, Prince of peace, Intervener in human affairs, and Friend of humans. It seems that Job's God is a different kind of God, as revealed in other parts of biblical revelation. Faith makes no sense and, to some extent, it makes the situation even worse.

Why didn't the Omnipotent God protect His servant? This is the real scandal in the story. We would like to see the Omnipotent and loving God intervene and immediately silence Satan's accusations and prevent him from harming Job. We wish that God would stop at once the abuse of children,

harm, blessed him so generously that he had become the Bill Gates of his time. On the other hand, Job is for a time abandoned by God and given into Satan's hands. There is no logic to this situation and seems self-contradictory. In this world evil reigns, and evil is irrational. Let us not try to find a logical answer to the problem of evil. We need to learn how to live with our unanswered questions. From that angle, the book of Job is really a quest for God's visible presence in life.

We often ask imprecise, misleading, or even false questions. The real issue can be expressed in the following way: How can Satan be defeated? This question needs to be answered to shed greater light on the whole issue of theodicy and the conflict in the

is stronger and thus has an advantage over Satan. The great controversy does need to be won but in a different way, by moral power. But how?

Satan can be defeated only by someone who is weaker than he is, and God can do it only with pure ammunition—love, truth, justice, freedom, and order. Satan draws different weapons from an evil arsenal: ambition, pride, selfishness, lies, deceit, violence, anger, hatred, prejudice, racism, terrorism, addictions, manipulation, etc. How often we wonder why our Almighty God allows tragedies to happen in the lives of good people, forgetting that God's victory is not won by power or force. Our gracious Lord is not acting like a superman. He wins by humility.

In the book of Revelation the Dragon and the devouring beasts were defeated by the innocent and fragile Lamb which is not what one can see in a natural world around us. The God of the whole universe had to become weak in order to defeat evil, thus the reason for the incarnation. Only with the frailties of humanity could He defeat Satan. On the cross of Calvary, the Creator God demonstrated His love, truth, and justice. The suffering God, hanging on the cross, is a victorious God. He lived a life in total dependence on and in relationship with His Father. What a paradox! Sin started with pride but was overcome by humility (Phil 2:5–11; Isa. 14:12–15).

In the story of Job, only Job himself, who is weaker than the devil, could refute Satan's argument, defeat him, and thus prove that God was right when He justified him and stood on Job's side! Job overcame the devil not because he was so good or strong (Job 7:21; 10:6; 14:17), but because he totally surrendered his life to God. He did this in full confidence and trust in the God who gave him strength and victory (13:15; 19:25–27; 42:5). Paul says eloquently: "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10 NIV). Thus, when Job demonstrated that

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rape of women, concentration camps, murders, suffering, car accidents, plane crashes, collapses of towers, pain, violence, hurricanes, tsunamis, and many other tragedies. People ask a poignant yet seemingly a simple question in times of tragedy, loss, and war: "Where is God?" The only answer to questions of suffering is that God was exactly in the same place where He was when His Son was murdered on the cross. God is always on the side of the oppressed, suffering person. In our suffering, He suffers. "In all their distress he too was distressed, . . . In his love and mercy he redeemed them" (Isa 63:9 NIV).

The book of Job begins with a tension. On the one hand, God put a hedge around Job, protecting him from any

book of Job. Surprisingly, Satan cannot be defeated by logic because there is a counterargument for every argument. To refute with external facts has no lasting results. If Satan could be defeated through debate, God would have done it a long time ago for He is the Truth (Exod 34:6; Deut 7:9; 32:4; Ps 31:6; Jer 10:10; John 17:17).

Can Satan be defeated by force? Nothing would please him more than to face force in whatever form as he wants to accuse God of using force, but he lacks evidence and cannot demonstrate it. The Omnipotent Creator, the Mighty Warrior (Exod 15:3; Judg 6:12; Isa 42:13; Jer 20:11), could silence Satan by physical power if He so chose. However, God would then be accused of not playing fair because He

he loved God above all, God was vindicated and His justice prevailed. God is just while justifying us because His grace and presence, even though very often unseen and silent, sustains His people. The beauty of God's character brilliantly shines, because our God is a God of love, truth, and justice.

The first task of the followers of Christ is to present a right picture of God, His character, to this world. This is the work needing to be accomplished before the second coming of Christ, because Satan has grossly distorted the character of God from the very beginning (see Gen 3:1–6), and the postmodern attacks on God, His character, and the Scriptures are more sophisticated and stronger than ever. Our task is to be witnesses for God and let His glory shine through our characters (Rev 14:7).

Revelation 18:1 states that at the end of world history the glory of God will shine throughout the world. The last work of God's people will be to let God illuminate the world with His glory through His people. This will be the most powerful argument in favor of God's existence and love, and His true character will be defended. If God is alive or dead among people depends on the lifestyle of God's followers. His people need to live to the glory of God, reflecting in their character the loving character of God. According to 2 Thess 1:3–5, the evidence that God is true and His judgments are just is the living faith and love of believers!

If God's followers are spiritually dead, then God is dead too, and Nietzsche's slogan "God is dead" would be right! We are a spectacle to the world and to the whole universe (1 Cor 4:9)! Ellen G. White powerfully explains our role in the parable about the ten virgins when she interprets the work of wise virgins:

So the followers of Christ are to shed light into the darkness of the world. Through the Holy Spirit, God's word is a light as it becomes a transforming power

in the life of the receiver. By implanting in their hearts the principles of His word, the Holy Spirit develops in men the attributes of God. The light of His glory—His character—is to shine forth in His followers. Thus they are to glorify God, . . . It is the darkness of misapprehension of God that is enshrouding the world. Men are losing their knowledge of His character. It has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. At this time a message from God is to be proclaimed, a message illuminating in its influence and saving in its power. His character is to be made known. Into the darkness of the world is to be shed the light of His glory, the light of His goodness, mercy, and truth. . . . The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love. The children of God are to manifest His glory. In their own life and character they are to reveal what the grace of God has done for them. The light of the Sun of Righteousness is to shine forth in good works—in words of truth and deeds of holiness.²

Many biblical texts assure that God is abundant in love (Exod 34:6–7; Ps 100:5; 117:2; 136:1–26; Rom 5:5, 8; 1 John 3:1; 4:16). "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?" (Rom 2:4 NIV). "Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him" (Ps 34:8 NIV). The God of the Bible is the God of love, truth, justice, freedom, and order!

In the time of deep trouble, there are no easy answers and often there are no answers. In those situations, we need to focus on the big picture of God's revelation that ultimately testifies about the goodness of God. An inscription was found on a wall in a cellar in Cologne, Germany, where Jews hid from the Nazis. The anonymous author, who perished with many others, left behind the following profound words: "I believe in the sun even when it does not shine. I believe in love, even when I do not feel it. I believe in God, even when He is silent"³

The best proof of God's existence and His goodness is our personal experience with Him. Only our appreciation of Christ's ultimate sacrifice for us on the cross can give us inner peace and assurance of His love in times when calamities, struggles, and tragedies of life strike. Christ-like Christians are the best proof for God's presence among us. Loving Christians are the ultimate argument for the God of love.

¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question — Why We Suffer* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 168.

² Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing, 1941), 415–416; emphasis supplied.

³ See Shmuel Waldman, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (3d and expand. ed.; Manuet, N.Y.: Feldheim Publishers, 2005), 197; Eugene B. Borowitz and Naomi Patz, *Explaining Reform Judaism* (Springfield, N.J.: Behrman House, 1985), 88.



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