Excursus: The Problem of Suffering

• Job was a righteous man according to his own self-appraisal and by the proclamations of YHWH Himself. But neither the three friends nor Elihu were able to accept his righteousness. Consequently, Job was regarded by them as a sinner. They concluded that he was being either insincere or dishonest in his self-appraisal.

• In the ANE world of Job and his friends, the material prosperity of the wicked was seen as a problem. How is it that the wicked are happy?

• The God of the Bible is both sovereign and loving. Mankind has always been tempted to reject one of these attributes at the expense of the other. And this is the challenge of Job. Job and his three friends believed in the reward-retribution concept of justice, and were struggling to understand why Job had suffered so severely at the hand of God. In their view, suffering was a cause-and-effect situation. They didn’t know the cause but saw what they perceived as the effect, and concluded that the cause must have been Job’s personal sin.
The Problem of Suffering

- Reward-retribution theology is taught throughout the Torah, in the Writings and in the Prophets (Prov 11:21; Isa 13:11). The Bible is the story of redemption from sin. Therefore, reward-retribution theology is not all that the Bible has to say on the subject. Is reward-retribution theology the end of all discussion? Clearly not.
- If reward-retribution could have explained everything about God, then Job and his friends would have found it necessary to dispense with one attribute or the other. The lesson of Job is that God's wisdom cannot be explained on the basis of reward-retribution alone. As Andersen states, "Human suffering is more than a system of rewards and punishments" (70). God makes decisions and takes actions on the basis of other criteria which are too big for man to contemplate. God looks forward and has a purpose for suffering that goes undetected in this life.
- Satan was never outside of God's control. God can actually transform evil into good. He continuously presided over the power of evil. And it's clear in the YHWH speeches that the cosmos is never outside of God's control. Job had a happy ending.

The Problem of Suffering

- But not all accounts get settled on this side of the grave. There must be a day of final reckoning. It would seem necessary for rewards and punishments to be postponed for heaven or hell, respectively. The concept of Sheol presented in the book of Job falls short of the revelation in the NT. For this reason, Job came to embrace a bodily resurrection and a final judgment before God, where he would be represented by his advocate, a goel.
- By God's own appraisal, Job was a righteous man and "did not sin" (1:22). God caused his suffering. The only explanation is that not all suffering is the result of sin. God is accomplishing things for His glory by means of human suffering. The heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 were all sufferers, and many of them died without deliverance. Therefore, we conclude that God causes suffering to glorify Himself and to bring blessing to the sufferer.
- Why does God allow suffering?
Roman Catholic Position on Suffering

Roman Catholic theology embraces the belief that suffering can alleviate a person’s sin. By suffering, the sinner “makes satisfaction for,” or “expiates” his personal sin. Through penance, the Roman Catholic version of self-inflicted suffering, the sinner is somehow able to strengthen his own salvation. The Roman Catholic formal position on this reads, “Any sins wrong our neighbor. One must do what is possible in order to repair the harm (e.g., return stolen goods, restore the reputation of someone slandered, pay compensation for injuries). Simple justice requires as much. But sin also injures and weakens the sinner himself, as well as his relationships with God and neighbor. Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must ‘make satisfaction for’ or ‘expiate’ his sins. This satisfaction is also called ‘penance.’”

Reference: Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. 1459, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c2a4.htm

Lee Lewis on Suffering

Facts to keep in constant focus:
• Believers and unbelievers alike will suffer.
• We suffer because we live in a fallen world.
• We also suffer from our own rebellion (Rom 6:23).
• We suffer from what others do to us (Ps 56).

Benefits of suffering:
• Deuteronomy 8. Suffering exposes the heart.
• 1 Peter 1:3-7. Progressive sanctification: already, not yet, past, present, future.
• Luke 12:22-34. Suffering reveals were our treasure is (12:34).
• 2 Cor 12:7-10. Thorn in the flesh.
• Press into Christ.
• Job asked God questions. This was helpful to him.

Exhortations:
• Do not allow your afflictions to define you
• Sit with people in their ashes and call them to trust in God’s sovereignty.
Charles Clough on Suffering

Our entire mortal lives are lived out fallen flesh in a fallen world where good and evil temporarily coexist. Consequently, our circumstances continually involve us in patterns of suffering. Listed below are eleven patterns of suffering: six directly due to creature sin and five used by the Lord for special ministries in history.

Direct Patterns of Suffering
- Effects of the Fall—physical and spiritual death, sickness, natural disturbances
- Effect of Personal Sin—self-induced misery; fruit of foolishness
- Shared Suffering within families and nations
- Eternal Suffering in Lake of Fire
- Fatherly Chastening of believers
- Denial of Rewards for believers

Indirect Patterns of Suffering
- Evangelistic “wake-up” call
- Nudge to advance spiritually
- Evidence for furthering evangelism
- Evidence for edifying believers
- Evidence for unseen angelic conflict


How to Handle Trials

We may:
1. Avoid (circumnavigate) the trial
2. Sidestep the trial
3. Retreat from the trial
4. Persevere through the trial

Reference: Jay E. Adams, Competent to Counsel
How to Handle Trials

We can mess up the opportunity posed by a trial. Jay Adams: “A problem is a test which, if solved biblically, strengthens and helps one grow in grace. Looked at from a different perspective, the same problem may be used by Satan as a temptation for sin.” Every trial is therefore an opportunity for spiritual growth. Unfortunately, we sometimes squander the opportunity by the way we handle the trial. God desires to display His glory in us as we persevere through the trial.

How to Handle Trials

• What is the instrument of God’s sanctifying process?
  – James 1:2-4, “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials (peirosmos), knowing that the testing (dokimazo) of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.
  • A peirosmos is a trial or a test, whose outcome is uncertain, sometimes with respect to sin and sometimes not.
  • A dokimazo is a different kind of test, usually with a favorable outcome, where success is almost assured, the outcome is not pass/fail but quantitative.
How to Handle Trials

1 Peter 1:6-7, "In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials (peirosmos), so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested (dokimazo) by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Redemptive Suffering

- In another circumstance 1700 years after Job, Jeremiah suffered innocently during a period of Divine judgment upon the nation of Judah for sinful disobedience and failure to obey God’s torah.
- Jeremiah was called to minister to his sinful generation.
- Jeremiah appealed to God for vindication (Jer 15:15-18).
- God answered Jeremiah’s appeal (Jer 15:19-21) by calling upon him to endure in spite of their persecution and criticisms. God called upon Jeremiah to repent or turn (shub, שָׁב) from his personal self-centeredness in the midst of his present difficulties. (Note the pronoun “you” appears 15 times in the three verses of Jeremiah 15:19-21, all are singular in number, referring to Jeremiah the individual. Thus, Jeremiah had a quasi-redemptive role to play in the suffering of Israel. His role was to be salt and light to his generation (Jer 15:19).
Redemptive Suffering

- Application: what does Jeremiah 15:19 say about personal evangelism?
- There is a need to take a stand for truth, even when it’s unpopular
- There is a need for personal holiness as a witness to unbelievers
- There is a need to be the kind of person unbelievers will turn to in their time of need
- We call this “redemptive suffering.”

Redemptive Suffering

NT Teaching

- Suffering patiently when doing right finds favor with God (1 Pet 2:20; 3:14-17).
- The suffering of Christ is a model for Christian suffering (1 Pet 2:21).
- Christians are to bless those who persecute them (1 Pet 3:8-9a).
- Purpose of redemptive suffering may include evangelism (1 Pet 3:1).
- The reward for redemptive suffering is that you inherit a blessing (1 Pet 3:9b, 14; Matt 5:10-12).
Interlude on Wisdom (28)

Chapter 28 is clearly an interlude, a break in the flow of the story. At first, this chapter may seem self-contained and almost incompatible with prior and subsequent material because it is an interruption in the storyline. The speaker is not identified, leading scholars to struggle to understand who wrote chapter 28 or even determine its purpose. Some believe chapter 28 sums up the book at this point. Its place in the book suggests that it serves as a transition from the three rounds of dialogue between Job and the three friends, to the speeches of Job, Elihu, and God.

We don’t know who the author is. The author of Job 28 isn’t any character in the book. Job understands the rules of retribution, but doesn’t fathom the wisdom that only God understands.

*Wisdom and Understanding*

- Two big ideas stated as questions are posed in chapter 28. These are posited in 28:12 and 28:20 (cf. 12:12; Prov 2:4-5; 9:10):
  - Where can wisdom be found?
  - Where is the place of understanding?
Outline of Job 28

**Nature doesn’t reveal wisdom (28:1-11)**
Comparison of mining for valuable commodities to searching for wisdom. Putting an end to darkness is like carrying a lamp into a mine. For wisdom it’s like showing light on the obscure.

**Man cannot find wisdom (28:12-22)**
Job 28:13 suggests wisdom is something man doesn’t know, or make a logical assessment of. Men need to be shown its priceless value and where to find it.

**God is the only source of wisdom (28:23-38)**

Outline of Job 28

**Analogy with mining (28:1-11)**
- Engineering - deep mine shafts (28:3-4)
- Manufacturing and commodity trading - gold (28:1, 6, 16, 17, 19), iron (28:2), copper (28:2), sapphire (28:6, 16), onyx (28:16), coral (28:18), crystal (28:18), pearls (28:18), topaz (28:19)
- Prospecting - no evidence on land surface (28:7-8)
- Excavation, earthmoving (28:9-10)
- Dams, reservoirs, impoundments (28:11)
Outline of Job 28

**God is the only source of wisdom (28:23-38)**

- God observes man’s activities, and God sees everything that man sees plus everything that man can’t see (28:23-24).
- God controls man’s environment (28:25-26).
- God controls everything, knows everything about everything, and created everything (28:27).
- Therefore, men are advised to trust in God alone.

Interlude on Wisdom (28)

An outline of chapter might resemble a series of propositions followed by questions, as illustrated below. These recur within the outline as a commentary on the subject matter, which is organized as three propositions. The conclusion is obviously drawn from the chapter.

A  Proposition 1 (28:1-11): Human research has not discovered wisdom and understanding.

   B  Question (28:12)

A’ Proposition 2 (29:13-19): Human wealth can’t purchase wisdom or understanding.

B’ Question (28:20)

A” Proposition 3 (28:21-27): God alone has wisdom and understanding, which if men possess at all, they receive as a gift from Him.

B” Answer (28:28)
Interlude on Wisdom (28)

• The question asked twice (B and B’) pertains to both wisdom and understanding.
• The answer is given in B’’.
• Both the questions and the answer concern two related but distinct concepts:
  – Wisdom (chokmah, חָכְמָה) and
  – Understanding (binah, בִּינָה)

Understanding

• “Understanding” (binah) means discernment, insight, consideration, perception. Its close association with the Hebrew adverb bayin (בַּ֫יִן) “between” suggests a choice being made between alternatives. Solomon prayed not for wisdom, but for understanding in order “to discern between good and evil” (1 Kings 3:9).
• “Understanding” suggests the need to make informed decisions, based upon wisdom. It is the fruit of wisdom, the work of wisdom.
Interlude on Wisdom (28)

Wisdom and understanding often travel together, and fear of YHWH is the point of beginning:

- Job 28:12, 20, 28
- Proverbs 9:10, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”
- Proverbs 14:6, “A scoffer seeks wisdom and finds none, But knowledge is easy to one who has understanding.”
- Proverbs 30:3, “Neither have I learned wisdom, nor do I have the knowledge of the Holy One.”
- Proverbs 1:7, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

What is Wisdom in the Bible?

1. Skill or intelligence. Ex. 31:6, Oholiab of Dan who was a craftsman. This is a human ability, whether cultivated or naturally-inclined or supernaturally endowed.
2. Moral or theological excellence. Proverbs refers to this type of wisdom. Wisdom appeals to man from every quarter (Prov 1&8). Her existence should be self-evident, crying out to be noticed, trying to get man’s attention. But wisdom has to be accessed, sought, pursued.
What is Wisdom in the Bible:

**3. The High Wisdom of God.** How people should think about the thoughts of God. This is the wisdom of Job 28. God knows what He is doing in the world, and only God knows. Man doesn’t know this wisdom. Human response should be to trust God and persevere with faith. Men can look everywhere for this wisdom but won’t ever find it.

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What is Wisdom in the Bible:

**Examples of the High Wisdom of God:**

- In 1 Corinthians 1, we see Christ and the cross as the wisdom of God, which is folly to men. There’s nothing evident or intuitive about this, it is the wisdom of Job 28.
- Prov 1:7 says we begin our search for wisdom by fearing God. Job 28:28 says it’s the whole of wisdom is to fear God.
- The high wisdom of God is beyond man’s reach. All of the high wisdom we can know is the command to fear God and trust Him.
Interlude on Wisdom (28)

- **Wisdom is Personified Attribute of God (Prov 8:22-31)**
  - Scripture personifies divine wisdom in the female gender, so that it seems to be almost a hypostasis of God, but stops just short of giving it separate existence. Wisdom should not be regarded as God but it does belong to God; it is one of his attributes.
  - Wisdom was brought forth from the beginning of creation (Prov 8:22-31).
  - Through wisdom, one is provided for and insulated from dishonor (Prov 9).
  - Wisdom protects civilizations whose leaders would listen to her (Prov 1:20; Prov 8:1, 6).
  - Wisdom is of greater value than wealth (8:11-12).

Interlude on Wisdom (28)

- **Wisdom and Folly are Personified as Women**
  - **Wisdom** (Prov 1:20-33; 8:1 ff) Women may have a sense of perception, or degree of wisdom, which many men seem to lack. (Rebekah with Jacob & Esau (Gen 27), Abigail & Nabal (1 Sam 25). Women can bring much to their marriage, including a maturing or taming influence that enhances the man.
  - **Folly** (Pro 9:13) Lack of wisdom is also personified as a woman. “The woman of folly is boisterous, She is naive and knows nothing.” Folly is personified sin and is contrasted against wisdom.
  - Whoever is willing to repent of their naïvetés are in a position to learn wisdom (Prov 9:4-6, 16-18).
Interlude on Wisdom (28)

- **Fear of YHWH leads to wisdom** - Wisdom for man is not only to make one humanly wise, but also to enable him to trust God (Job 28:28).
- Wisdom leads to knowledge of the Holy One (Prov 9:10). So, men are to listen to the wisdom of God with attentive ears (Prov 2:2).
- Inner happiness only comes when man attains this wisdom (Prov 3:13).
- Wisdom is accessed through a strenuous search (Prov 2:4), not in nature, but a search for God himself (Prov 2:5).
- Skeptics will never find this wisdom and will never know the full meaning of life (Prov 14:6ff).
- In the great poem of Job 28, wisdom in this special biblical sense enables us to fully trust God in every circumstance.

Applications on Wisdom

- Wisdom exists only in complete fidelity to God’s word (Jas 3:14).
- Wisdom does not co-exist with a sinful lifestyle (Jas 3:15-16).
- Wisdom does not exist apart from good works and spiritual fruit (Jas 3:17-18).
- God is anxious to bestow wisdom upon those who ask (Jas 1:5-8).
- Grow in wisdom by studying the character of God as revealed in the Torah (Ps 19:7).