

SCRIPTURE & WELLBEING

5 Dark night

Today we're exploring how our image of God can affect our spiritual wellbeing in times of suffering and crisis with a focus on the figure of Job.

Pray

'Lord, in your Word you say you care. Thank you.'

Scripture

'As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.'
Psalm 103:13



Christ of St John of the Cross by Salvador Dali, 1951.

Oil on canvas. Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_of_Saint_John_of_the_Cross#/media/File:Christ_of_Saint_John_of_the_Cross.jpg

This painting by the Surrealist artist Dalí, depicts Jesus on the cross in a darkened sky, hanging over a body of water complete with a boat and fishermen. Dalí was inspired by a crucifixion sketch that the Spanish Carmelite and mystic, St John of the Cross, drew in 1550; and by an unusual dream. Here, Jesus is outstretched and outcast, but not outdone.

Reflection

A religious sceptic may ask a believer: 'How can you believe in a loving God, so long as you and yours are okay, knowing that minute by minute, since the dawn of time, countless lives across the globe have been marred and wiped out by violence, disease and natural disasters?'

The way we feel about God is rarely a matter of logic. For the believer, these things are more visceral than intellectual. As the philosopher, Blaise Pascal, quipped: 'The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of.'

There is no rationally satisfying answer to the problem of pain. And if there was, the last thing we would want to say to someone who had just been diagnosed with an incurable disease, is: 'Now, let me explain why this has happened to you.' All we'd want to do is, sit with them in silence and with compassion.

There are numerous passages in the Scriptures that grapple with evil and suffering, and none of them more so than the Book of Job.

It's a bit of an outlier, like Ecclesiastes. But it's in the Bible, nonetheless.

The framing story is that of a righteous man whose loyalty to God is tested to the limit as he loses loved ones, health and livelihood. Even in the face of extreme suffering, however, Job does not become an atheist, for which God rewards him in the end.

This simple prose account may have been the original story: trust God even when the going gets tough and ultimately all will be well. But then there are 40 chapters of poetry in between, perhaps inserted by a later hand, and they are nothing like the beginning and the end.

The bulk of the Book of Job asks all the questions we would never utter in polite society. Job laments, loudly. He cries out to God. He stamps his foot. 'Why?' he asks, desperate for an answer to the problem of evil. But no answer comes.

Three friends, who attempt to comfort Job in his grief, insist that he must have done something to deserve divine punishment. Yet Job insists categorically, that he has done nothing wrong.

When, eventually, God does decide to reply to Job, there is still no resolution to the problem of pain. All Job realises is that God is sovereign and the human mind too limited to understand the mysteries of the universe. God argues against the idea of retributive justice – that only sinners will suffer –, which Job's friends were so fond of. God also corrects Job's conclusion that he doesn't care about his suffering. Bottom line: the world is too big for finite human minds.

Logic and reason can neither satisfy Job's hunger for understanding, nor cure his utter depression and despair. There is only one way to God: a journey through the dark night of the soul, as St John of the Cross poetically put it.

Job takes that journey and, for all his questioning of God's ways, he never lets go of God himself.

We can learn a number of things from Job's journey through the dark night:

Bad things happen to good people. Some Christians would turn this on its head and ask, why do good things happen to bad people; in other words, why would God care at all about a blatantly sinful race? Be that as it may, be wary of people peddling the idea that 'God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life', i.e. that all will be well and you'll experience abundant blessings, so long as you just have enough faith. According to Job, anyone

embarking on the spiritual journey would be well advised to expect headwinds and giant waves.

There is no automatic link from misfortune to sin. It's what Job's friends thought, and God refutes them, telling Job that life is a lot more complicated. Equally, don't expect God to punish you every time you say or do something wrong. Trust in his forgiveness and compassion.

The riddles of the universe, including the problem of pain, are an equation which human maths can't solve. Job learns to accept suffering as a part of life and a part of maturity.

And the Book of Job reminds us of the reality that the long journey towards God can include a 'dark night' – an arduous time of spiritual growth pains, of crisis, of doubt.

Most importantly, God turns up in the end: a holy, overwhelming presence, yes, but ready to meet a frail human in their despair.

The message of Job: don't let go of that hope, even after years of turmoil – that God is there with you, from beginning to end.

Pray

Lord of light, guide my steps as I walk through the dark night of suffering and doubt. Let me end up praying, like Job: 'I know that my redeemer lives' (Job 19:25). Amen

Reflection and action

Take time to mull over one or more of the following questions:

Am I angry with God? Is it sinful to feel that way?

Do I believe that evildoers should always get their comeuppance?

Do I believe that everything happens for a reason, or can I live with unsolved mysteries?

Reflection on the painting



Isle of the Dead by Arnold Böcklin, 1880 version.

Oil on canvas. Basel Museum of Art.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arnold_B%C3%B6cklin_-_Die_Toteninsel_I_\(Basel,_Kunstmuseum\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arnold_B%C3%B6cklin_-_Die_Toteninsel_I_(Basel,_Kunstmuseum).jpg)

This sinister picture is the best-known painting of the 19th century Swiss Symbolist artist, Arnold Böcklin. It was said to hang in every Berlin home because it epitomised the period with its combination of stillness and the sublime, death and Dante-esque journeying. See how the symmetry of the rocks holding the stage, embraces blackened cypress trees which seem to lead the viewer into another world. The white figure guarding the shrouded coffin draws you ever nearer to the void. This is grief, this is death, but is there hope?

With only the moon for light, this desolate and rocky islet floating on an expanse of dark water calls to the oarsman as he approaches the shore. This moment of mourning in time with the water's rhythm is a funeral song to all those who grieve. Cliffs and crevices, caves and grottos have always been places of sanctuary or flight. The longer we gaze, the quieter the scene becomes. If we heard a pin drop, the echo would travel far.

Some people have interpreted the oarsman as the Greek boatman Charon, who ferried the souls of the dead across the river Styx in Greek mythology. They see it as a vision of the departed one into the murky underworld – en-route to meet its fate. There are no birds circling, no vultures waiting for dinner; no stars for comfort or wind in the trees. There are no people waiting to meet the boat and its crew. How did we arrive here? What happens next?

The dead of night is bleak, it is powerful. It is magical and beyond the known world. Arnold Böcklin has created a space and a place for all our fears and anxieties. He has opened the door onto the subconscious and permitted us to cry out with all our doubts and sorrows. In this painting, nothing is too difficult to comprehend. We just need to let go, and let God in.

Scripture passage

Psalm 130

A Song of Ascents.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.
Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

Bible texts for further reflection

Does God care?
Seeing God for who he is
What is this? Why is that?

Job 22:1–9
Job 42:5–6
Ecclesiastes 39:12–21

Further reading

The Shattering of Loneliness: On Christian remembrance by Erik Varden, Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018.
Dark Night of the Soul by St John of the Cross, Dover Publications, 2003.
Praying our Goodbyes: A Spiritual Companion through Life's Losses and Sorrows by Joyce Rupp, Ave Maria Press, 2009.