

**More**  
Job 21:1-7  
2 Corinthians 12:7b-10  
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There are those in this world who suffer. I don't mean to rock your boat or anything, but that's the facts, Max. There are folks who suffer pain. Physical pain that wracks their body without relief. Emotional pain from staggering losses. Moral pain at the state of this world. Mental suffering with no way out they can see. Pain. Suffering. A private agony that isolates them, erodes their very sense of self. Robs them of motivation, motion, and sometimes even emotion. Some of us might know somebody who is suffering. Some of us here today might *be* one of those who suffer. What do you say to somebody who is suffering without any hope of relief? What do you say?

Look, Job nailed it in his plaintive question: Why? You've heard it. I've heard it. After the doctor says the word "cancer," after the fall when you hear a crack, and feel the searing pain, after you read the headlines about another shooting, another earthquake, your first words may well be, "Oh, God." And then, "why me?" Or just, "why?" God. Why. The two just naturally seem to run together. Because any kind of suffering calls into question not only my future, but can hammer open a crack in our sense of the moral order of the whole universe. Where was God when that tsunami killed over two hundred thousand people, the day after Christmas in 2004? And Job's question scales up his personal suffering to embrace backlashes against women having power over their own bodies, Black people just trying to live, you know, barbecuing in city parks, jogging through neighborhoods, walking into their own houses, hoping to wake up alive while sleeping in their own beds. Transgender persons just receiving needed medical care without hassles and, you know, using bathrooms. Yes, suffering wears many clothes, but it can burn our souls to cinders. Job's plaintive cry ropes in all of that – all of it. And screams: "*WHY??*" Because, truth be told, it cuts to the heart of our faith. The crucial issue is less, "how can God permit suffering and injustice?" No, Job rips the scab off the eternal suspicion: "*can we trust God?*"(1) In this world of woe, in this vale of tears, can we trust God? We wrestle with where God is. *Who* God is. Does God care. Does God even *notice* us. Suffering is a titanic struggle of faith. And that struggle is plowed into the very soil from which Israel sprang. Remember, after he wrestled through the *night* with an angel, Jacob's name was changed to "Isra-el:" "he who struggles with God." And it's been that way ever since. Yes, Job nailed it for us. Faith's deepest struggle: can we trust God?

Well, flip through the pages of scripture, and you'll hear a variety of responses. Job's wife takes the pragmatic route in her spousal advice to his agony: "Just curse God and die."(Job 2:9) Lest we start beating up on hard-hearted wives and foolish women, as Job does(2:10), God offers not much better to Job, haranguing him at length about missing out on the glories of Creation, repeating "where were you when I..." over and over until Job hollers "uncle!"(chapters 38 through 42) And then here comes Paul. "*Three times*" he says, "count 'em – *three!* I lay out my problem to God Almighty, this 'thorn in my flesh,' and what do I get?" Now, you can imagine Paul – who, remember, *has* seen the risen Jesus up close, so you could say he does have a personal connection with the man

– you can imagine him praying: “God, I’ve got this problem. It won’t let up. Please fix it. Heal me, please.” No soap. So he tries again, in the midnight stillness: “God, please. It hurts. Terrible pain. Way beyond annoying. Keeps me up at night. Will not quit. I’ve tried everything. Please, *please* give me some relief.” Again, nada. So he tries a different tack this time, wheedling: “God, You called me to a mighty ministry. But this dang ‘thorn in the flesh’ is crippling my work! Think of all the good I could do – the *more* I could do, if You just flexed Your pinkie finger and waved it away.” Again, no dice. Not even a sympathy note in the mail. How is this possible? Is God there? Doesn’t God care? Yes, flip through the pages of scripture, and you could get a little bit disillusioned.

And yet. . . . And yet God *does* respond. Maybe not in the most satisfying way, true. But God does respond. To Job. To Paul. What does God say? Each time the answer comes back, “My grace is enough for you.” Say what? That’s it? I’m in searing agony, and you offer me a box of tissues? But take another listen. There may be more here than first meets the ear. Let’s listen in on a more recent sufferer’s experience. Novelist Reynolds Price might offer some insight here, from his book *A Whole New Life*. In 1984 Price was diagnosed with cancer of the spine, and the book is a chronicle of his journey through the devastation from this invasion of his body, toward his coming to terms with “a whole new life” as a result. One scene in particular is riveting, and opens up a world of insight. His cancer catapulted him into intense prayer, asking God for help, for relief, for healing, for escape. One night in particular, he asked into the dark from his bed of pain, “how much more do I take?” As Price tells it: “A long silent pause, then a voice at normal speaking strength said the one word ‘More.’”(2) Now, riveting as this story may be, that one word somehow fails to offer spectacular help. We might be tempted to mumble, “Gee, thanks a lot, God.” But a second look might reveal depths of insight stuffed into that single word. First, let me suggest that it offers a hard-nosed realism about the real suffering of real people. It says, “yes, your pain *will* continue. You will not easily dodge this hell.” In the heat of his affliction, I would not blame either Price or Paul if he had countered, “is there anyone else out there?” Even Jesus, in the agony of the Garden of Gethsemane, pleaded, “take this cup of suffering away from me.”(Luke 22:42 NIV) We see realism first of all in this single word, “more.” But there is a confidence revealed as well, strangely enough. For couched within this word is the promise to Price that he *will* be able to endure what will come. There is an absolute confidence packed into that one word, a confidence coming straight from the One Who knows us best. You have a strength you don’t even know; a courage beyond your fears. And here is the ground of that confidence. The response, “more,” is exactly that: a *response*. A *voice* spoke to Price. He prayed, and Someone answered. And in that answer, gave the promise that Price would not have to make the journey alone. There was no promise of a cure from his affliction, but rather the promise of *God’s presence with him*, every step of the way. You are not alone, and whatever happens from here on, you will not be left alone. This single word promises a presence that responds to our deepest pleas, and reaches out toward us in our fiercest agonies. God *will* respond. Count on it.

Now, here is where things start getting interesting. There is more to this “more.” In a later book, Reynolds Price retells this story of that single word response in the darkness of his sickroom. He wrote this second book in response to a blunt query he received from a young medical student, whose cancer had returned aggressively. Price’s story carried its own authority to understand this man’s plight, and offer meaningful hope. “I’ve been to the depths of Hell,” his story says, “and I *did* make it through. I *know* why. And you can, too.”(3) If you think about it, you find that simply

astonishing, for look what just happened. Now that one word *transfers its promise to another sufferer*. Life is *not* over, and the authority of my pain can offer some meaning to you in the very midst of your own trials. What a unique gift from one human to another! Remember the second part of what God said to Paul? God said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” That would be *God’s* power made fully present in *our* weakness. Paul marvels, “for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” It is *God’s* strength that Reynolds Price is sharing with the young medical student, through the testimony of Price’s own experience. He says, this is what happened to me. God responded. And it was enough. And, says Price, it can be enough for you, as well. You, too, can experience the promise of God’s presence in the midst of your own suffering. You will experience “more.”

And you and me? Some of us have already known our own private agonies. The rest of us *will*. Count on it. And more times than not, our faith is shaken. But know this: we will *not* be alone in our suffering. Never! In fact, sometimes the love of God floods in *through those very cracks hammered open by suffering*, in ways we just never expected. And more than that, in the utter mystery of God’s care, those of us who have undergone suffering can offer a unique gift to our fellow-sufferers: our *own* experience of God’s presence through it all. We, too, can offer “more.” Amen.

#### Notes

(1) A line of thought suggested by Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 386-92.

(2) Reynolds Price, *A Whole New Life* (New York: Athenum, 1994), 80

(3) *Ibid.*, *Letter to a Man in the Fire: Does God Exist and Does He Care?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 28.