THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

The Friends Are Still Talking

The friends are still talking. They have better vocabulary now.

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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Four Men at a Table

In the summer of 2022, four men sat down in Houston to talk about the oldest objection to the Christian faith. Alex O'Connor, an atheist, hosted. Joe Schmid, an agnostic, laid out the hardest version of the argument. Trent Horn, a Catholic apologist, and Cameron Bertuzzi, then a Protestant, answered for the faith. The conversation runs a little over an hour, and it is worth your time.

I want to say plainly at the start that this was a good conversation. Nobody shouted. Nobody scored cheap points. These are intelligent men who like each other, and they went out for burgers afterward. Joe's case from animal suffering is honest and hard. Trent's answers are careful. Alex is fair to the people he disagrees with, which is rarer than it should be.

But as I listened, I kept hearing another conversation underneath this one. It is very old. It takes place on an ash heap in the land of Uz. Three friends come to comfort a man who has lost everything, and after a week of silence they begin to explain. They talk for most of the book. At the end, God tells them they were wrong.

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The Friends' Method, Updated

Watch what the conversation actually does. Alex opens by calling the problem of evil the strongest argument against God. From there, every answer offered takes the same basic shape: find the reason that makes the suffering make sense.

The moves are familiar to anyone who has read a little philosophy of religion. God permits suffering because it makes possible higher goods like courage, compassion, and forgiveness. God permits evil because free will is worth the cost. Perhaps animals do not suffer as much as we think, or perhaps they will be compensated in the next life. Perhaps God's reasons are real but beyond our reach. Perhaps evil is only the absence of good, the way rust is the absence of sound metal. On the other side, Joe runs a probability argument: a world built on hundreds of millions of years of predation is more surprising if God exists than if He does not.

These are serious arguments. But notice what both sides agree on. They agree that the question is settled by looking at the world, weighing its goods against its evils, and reading off what kind of God, if any, stands behind it. Theist and atheist alike stand in front of creation with a scale.

That is exactly what Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar did. Their argument was simpler, but the method was the same. They looked at Job's ruin and reasoned backward to its cause. God is just. Job is suffering. Therefore Job must have sinned, and the way out is to repent of whatever it was. Eliphaz tells Job to consider whether the innocent ever perish. Bildad

suggests his children got what they deserved. Zophar tells him God has punished him less than he has earned. Every one of them is defending God. Every one of them is reading God's purposes off what can be seen.

Luther had a name for this. In the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518 he distinguished the theologian of glory from the theologian of the cross. The theologian of glory looks at the visible works of God and claims to see through them to God's invisible nature: His power, His wisdom, His goodness. The theologian of the cross knows God only where God has chosen to show Himself, which is in suffering and in the cross. Thesis 21 is the sharp one. The theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. The theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is.

That is the problem with theodicy. It is not that the arguments are always weak. Some are quite strong. The problem is that a successful theodicy has to end up calling evil good, or at least necessary, or worth it. It has to say that the koala burning in the Australian fire, or the child dying of a degenerative disease, fits somewhere in a ledger that balances. The friends called Job's suffering deserved. The modern versions call it useful. Either way, the evil gets explained, and an explained evil is no longer quite evil.

The theologian of the cross refuses to do that. He calls death an enemy. He calls the ruin of Job's house a ruin. And he looks for God somewhere other than the ledger.

"For Nothing"

We usually say the book of Job asks why the righteous suffer. That is not quite the question the book itself puts on the table. The question comes from the accuser in the first chapter:

> Satan answered the LORD, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (Job 1:9)

The Hebrew word is *ḥinnām*: for nothing, for free, without cause, gratis. The accuser's charge is that Job's faith is a transaction. Job fears God because God has fenced him in with blessing. Take away the payment and the piety will go with it. The whole drama of the book is a test of that one claim. Will a man trust God when there is nothing in it for him?

Then comes the striking part. In the next chapter, God uses the same word about what has been done to Job. The accuser, He says, incited Him against Job to ruin him *ḥinnām*, without cause. Job suffers for nothing. The question is whether he will believe for nothing.

Now go back to the roundtable. Every theodicy offered there, whether it is the free will defense, the soul-making answer, or the argument from higher goods, is an attempt to show that the suffering was not for nothing. It bought something. It produced courage, or

freedom, or compassion, or a better world on balance. The theodicist is trying, with the best intentions, to put the payment back. He wants to show that Job's loss was really an investment.

But that concedes the accuser's premise. It assumes that faith needs the ledger to balance before it can stand. Job never gets that ledger. He never learns about the wager in heaven. He is never told what his suffering accomplished. The book's answer to *does Job fear God for nothing?* is yes. He does. He rages, he complains, he demands a hearing, but he does not let go of God, and he does it without being paid.

That is not stoicism, and it is not blind submission. It is faith in the strict sense: trust that does not rest on what can be seen.

What God Actually Says

After thirty-some chapters of argument, God speaks out of the whirlwind. His first words are a rebuke:

> "Who is this who obscures My counsel by words without knowledge?" (Job 38:2)

Then come four chapters of questions. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Can you bind the Pleiades? Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Can you draw out Leviathan with a hook?

On the surface this sounds like skeptical theism, which came up near the end of the roundtable. That view says God may well have reasons for permitting evil, but our minds are too small to see them, so we cannot conclude from our failure to see a reason that there is none. Alex rightly pressed on it: if we are that far in the dark about God's reasons, how can we know anything about what God will do?

But the speeches from the whirlwind are not an argument about the limits of our data. God does not say, "There is a reason, and you would accept it if you could understand it." He gives no reason at all. What He gives is Himself. The God whom Job has been begging to meet shows up and speaks to him by name. That is the answer. Job's own response makes it clear:

> "My ears had heard of You, but now my eyes have seen You." (Job 42:5)

Job is not satisfied because his questions were answered. They were not. He is satisfied because the God he addressed has answered *him*.

Then comes the verdict that should stop every theodicist cold. God turns to Eliphaz:

> "My wrath is kindled against you and your two friends. For you have not spoken about Me accurately, as My servant Job has." (Job 42:7)

The word translated "accurately" is *nĕkônâ,* from a root meaning firm, established, right. What the friends said about God did not stand. What Job said did.

Think about who is who. The friends spent the whole book defending God's justice. Job spent much of it accusing God of injustice to His face. He said God had wronged him. He said God would not answer. He demanded a trial. And God says Job spoke rightly, and the defenders did not.

Why? Because Job took his complaint to God. He never stopped addressing Him. He would not pretend that his suffering was deserved or that it made sense. He called the thing what it was. The friends talked *about* God. Job talked *to* Him. And in the end the friends have to bring their sacrifice to Job, so that Job can pray for them.

The Atheist's Closing Line

The most interesting moment in the conversation comes at the very end, and it belongs to Alex. Summing up, he says the problem of evil is usually framed as a response to religion. He thinks it is the other way around. The best treatment of despair and meaninglessness, he says, is not found in modern atheist writers. It is found in Ecclesiastes, in Job, and in the Psalms. Maybe, he suggests, religion itself arose as a response to suffering.

He means that as a deflating point. Religion is what human beings build when the world hurts too much. But it is a remarkable thing for an atheist to say, and he is more right than he intends.

He is right that Scripture takes suffering more seriously than its critics do. The Psalms are full of complaint. *How long, O LORD?* is practically a refrain. Ecclesiastes looks at the world under the sun and calls it vapor. Job curses the day he was born. Lamentations is five chapters of grief over a ruined city. No other sacred literature gives so much room to people shouting at God.

But look at what that means for his theory. If the Bible were a coping mechanism, a story people tell themselves so the world will feel safer, we would expect it to sound like Job's friends. Coping mechanisms explain. They reassure. They tell you everything happens for a reason and the good are rewarded and the wicked are punished. That is exactly the theology God rebukes at the end of Job.

What the Bible actually contains is a book that sets up the coping mechanism and then has God condemn it. It contains Psalm 88, which ends in darkness with no turn toward hope. It contains Ecclesiastes, which refuses to pretend that the righteous always prosper. A religion invented to make suffering bearable would not have kept those texts. They are there because the God of Israel does not let His people lie, not even on His behalf.

So Alex is right to point to Job and the Psalms. They are the best words ever written about suffering. But they are not the words of people talking themselves into comfort. They are the words of people talking to a God who would not let them settle for the comfortable answer.

The Answer That Is Not an Explanation

In the middle of his worst speeches, with his friends turned against him, Job says something none of them expected:

> "But I know that my Redeemer lives, and in the end He will stand upon the earth. Even after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God." (Job 19:25–26)

Job does not know why he is suffering. He does know who will stand over his grave. That is the shape of Christian hope. It does not explain the evil. It names the One who will undo it.

Two moments at the roundtable came close to this. Cameron, talking about the end of *Les Misérables*, asked whether we would rather evil never existed or evil be defeated. That is the right question, and it deserved more than the minute it got. And Trent closed with the story of his friend Jimmy Akin, whose wife died shortly after their wedding. For Jimmy, Christianity is the one hope that evil will be answered and that he will see her again. Trent said he will not give that up without a good reason. That is not theodicy. That is hope, and it was the most honest moment in the hour.

But hope in what, exactly? Here the conversation never quite arrived. The Christian answer to evil is not a principle. It is a Person and an event. God did not stand outside the world and explain why it hurts. He entered it. The eternal Son took flesh, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. On the cross God took the full weight of evil into Himself. On the third day He rose, and death lost its claim.

That does not tell us why the koalas burned. It tells us what God has done about death, and what He will do. The cross is not the missing line in the ledger that finally makes it balance. It is the place where God shows that He is for us, in the middle of the very suffering we cannot explain.

Luther saw the distinction clearly in *The Bondage of the Will*. There is God hidden and God preached. The hidden God does many things He has not told us about, and Luther warns us not to go prying there. We are not given access to the hidden counsels behind every catastrophe. We are given the God who is preached: the God who comes to us in His Word, in Baptism, in the Supper, in Christ crucified for sinners. Faith clings to that God and leaves the hidden one alone.

At the end of the same book, Luther speaks of three lights. By the light of nature, it seems unjust that the wicked prosper and the good suffer. By the light of grace, that problem is solved, because we learn there is a life after this one. But a deeper problem remains: how God can condemn those who cannot turn to Him by their own power. That, Luther says, will be answered only by the light of glory, when God's justice, now hidden, will be revealed.

That is where Christians actually stand. Not with a theodicy that balances the books today, but with a promise that the books will be opened on the last day, by the One who was nailed to the cross. Until then we do what Job did. We take our complaints to God. We hold Him to His promises. And we wait for our Redeemer to stand upon the earth.

Back to the Ash Heap

It is easy to be hard on Job's friends, but they began well. When they first saw him, they wept, tore their robes, and threw dust on their heads. Then they did the best thing they did in the whole book:

> Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights, but no one spoke a word to him because they saw how intense his suffering was. (Job 2:13)

They only went wrong when they opened their mouths to explain.

That is worth remembering the next time someone you love is on the ash heap: a diagnosis, a death, a child gone astray, a marriage ending. The urge to explain is strong. We want to say it happened for a reason, that God is teaching something, that it will make them stronger. Most of the time that does nothing for them, and some of the time it is the friends' error all over again.

What we have to give is not an explanation. It is our presence, our prayers, and the Word that does not lie: *My Redeemer lives.* God has not told us why. He has told us who He is, and He has shown us on the cross what He is willing to do for us. He has promised that the One who rose from the dead will stand upon the earth at the last, and that those who belong to Him will see Him with their own eyes.

The four men in Houston had a thoughtful conversation, and I am grateful for it. But the best line in it belonged to the atheist, who sent us back to Job. We should go. And when we get there, we should notice who God says spoke rightly about Him. It was not the men with the arguments. It was the man on the ash heap, crying out to God and refusing to let Him go, and believing, against everything he could see, for nothing.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), dedicated to the public domain. Identified translation and textual-variant comparisons retain the readings discussed.