

More people point to the problem of evil and suffering as their reason for not believing in God than any other—it is not merely a problem, it is the problem.

A Barna poll asked, "If you could ask God only one question and you knew he would give you an answer, what would you ask?" The most common response was, "What is your favorite color? Just kidding, it was: "Why is there pain and suffering in the world?"

That was the question that Job faced. The story of Job was written to question the then held belief that if good things happen to you, you are living a good godly life. Bad things? What did you do to deserve it?

If not you, maybe your wretched life is a payback for family sin; maybe something your kids did or dead relatives?

(Mind you Job's tradition knew nothing of heaven or hell, so God had to reward the good and punish the evil in this life.)

Job is depicted as a very holy man, whose story was written five centuries before Jesus was born. In the story, everybody loved Job and God blessed him abundantly. Job had seven sons, three daughters and a huge number of animals. Job always praised God and thanked him for his many blessings.

One day, a creature called "The Adversary" came to God and said that it was no wonder that Job was happy because God had done so much for Job. The Adversary told God that if he removed all of Job's possessions, Job would no longer be faithful and thankful. God decided to test The Adversary's theory.

God allowed all of Job's possessions to be destroyed, which included thousands of livestock. On top of that, all of Job's children were killed when a mighty wind blew down a house where all of his children had gathered.

But did Job condemn God? No, he did not. Rather, he shaved his head and tore off his clothes and said, "Naked I came out of my mother's womb, and naked I shall return: the Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

The Adversary then came to God and said, "Well, Job is still faithful. But that's only because everything you took away from him was external to him. If you strike him directly, he won't be faithful to you anymore." And thus, Job was struck with horrible boils all over his skin.

Job scraped his painful, ugly, diseased skin with shards of broken pottery as he sat on a dung pile. At this point, Job's wife wanted him to curse God and die, but Job refused to do so.

Finally, three friends of Job came to be with him, at which point he finally decided to curse the day he was born. But then God came along and in essence told him he did not understand what it all involved to be God!

Hence, Job, despite all his losses, stays faithful to God. Many centuries after Job, we find ourselves asking the same question: "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

It's also been said that expecting the world to treat you fairly because you're a good person is a little like expecting the bull not to attack you because you're a vegetarian. A fair question to ask in Job's time, when this life is all he had. But behind our suffering, looms Jesus Christ.

The most wonderful, faithful, purest of all humans, suffered greatly, not only in his crucifixion, but in the rejections and betrayals. Sad things happened to very good people in his time as in ours.

It is no accident that the Church has placed the story of Job at his very saddest, with the Gospel of Mark telling of Jesus' healing Peter's mother-in-law. The message is clear: No matter what problems we may face in this world, whatever our suffering, Jesus looms.

With apologies to all mothers-in-laws, I offer the following humorous observation. Scripture scholars look for the reason behind gospel miracles. One pundit has suggested that Christ cured Peter's mother-in-law to get even with Peter who he knew would deny him three times.

A church magazine cartoon pictures a physician in his office, speaking with his bookkeeper. The subject of their conversation is a patient's bill, which apparently had been in the accounts receivable file for a long, long time.

The bookkeeper says to the doctor, "He says that since you told him his recovery was a miracle, he sent his check to the Church." Just a little humor amidst the background of Job's life.

The mother-in-law of Simon is in bed with fever. Jesus takes her hand still hot with fever and helped her up. The same Greek words were used in Mark 16:6 when it says, "He has been raised."

Today's scene is an allusion to the resurrection. Jesus did not rid the world of suffering but provided us its future because of him. Yes, in Jesus' presence, evil and death are conquered; they give way to life. Job never had this and thus it is understandable why one might question as he did.

Jesus gives meaning to all suffering with the assurance we will be raised up from our sickness and arise to worship him (or to "wait upon him.") In this light, we are to recognize that our sorrow is inseparable from our joy, is to always understand our suffering, ourselves, in the light of eternity.

Strange as it may seem, one of the primary purposes of allowing our faith to be shaken by suffering is to make our faith more unshakable. Faith is like muscle tissue: if you stress it to the limit, it gets stronger, not weaker. When your faith is threatened and tested and stretched to the breaking point, the result is greater capacity to endure and to love.

Jesus didn't ignore pain but didn't see to avoid it. Jesus saw the mystery of human suffering much more profoundly. Suffering, deep in human existence, and an essential part of sin and estrangement from God, can also be a means of purification and return to God.

Author Ronald Rohlheiser put it this way, "Crises of every kind will find us ... [But] these crises enter our lives not just as challenges to us to retain our balance and stability, but as invitations to stretch our hearts and our minds ... [Every crisis] includes within [itself] an invitation for us to move from being good people to becoming great people."

Why do bad things happen to good people? It might answered, for good people to become great people in the eyes of God's.