

How Can One Believe in God When There Is So Much Suffering?
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When I was in the seventh grade, I asked my Sunday School teacher, “How can there be a God when there is so much suffering in the world?” Dear “Brother” Johnson did his best in answering my question, “You’ve got to have faith.” I knew that I didn’t have sufficient “faith” as he put it; and I rejected God.

How I wished that he had answered me differently. First of all, imagine how powerful it would have been to have said something like, “Paul, tell me about the suffering in the world that you notice.” It would have felt more affirming to have him be curious about the opening of my young heart to the pain I had witnessed around me. Could I have begun to articulate what I was feeling? The agony that my young heart felt at witnessing the gross inequities of the haves and have-nots. My own confusion at being a child with so many advantages, while others seemed to have so little. The good fortune at being born with privilege, an intact family, access to education and health care, while others were born in despair, without the very things I could take for granted. How affirming it would have been to have had an adult that I respected indicate his interest in my feelings!

I wished he had then said something like, “Paul, that’s a fascinating question. Many before you have struggled with it, and many after you will struggle with it, for it’s one of the most basic questions that we humans live with.”

He might then have pointed me to the book of Job in the Jewish scripture, where the authors wrestled with a similar question. How is it that a good man suffers such losses? Job’s friends think that Job must have sinned – that he’s hiding some transgression. But Job has honestly assessed his life; and knows that he has nothing to hide. Still he suffers. How can he affirm his faith in God in the face of his suffering?

I wished Brother Johnson had said, “Your question presents an opportunity. Reflect on it deeply; read how others have addressed it. You’re on the right track.” He might have acknowledged that I was at a crucial point in faith formation. I was on that brink of giving up a concrete, literal image of God, for a more nuanced, metaphorical image.

Instead, with his “you’ve-got-to-have-faith” response, I threw out the old without entertaining a new image.

You can imagine how I wince when I hear a young person share their credo that they don’t believe in God because there is so much suffering in the world. I wish for them the conversation that I did not have; and I fear that we do not have it sufficiently among us.

Indeed people of deep faith have struggled with this question, “How can one believe in God when there is so much suffering in the world?”

Of course there’s the answer, satisfying to some, “Who are we to question the ways of God?” The end of Job, scholars argue, is a tag-on that writers added to avoid the challenging question that the story of Job presents. In some of the most beautiful poetry of the Jewish scripture, God “speaks” to Job, leaving him in submission:

Then the Lord answered Job out of the tempest....

*Brace yourself and stand up like a [human being;]
I will ask questions, and you shall answer.
Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?
... Who watched over the birth of the sea, when it burst in flood from the
womb? –
When I wrapped it in a blanket of cloud and cradled it in fog...?
Have you descended to the springs of the dead or walked in the
unfathomable deep?
Have the gates of death been revealed to you?
... have you comprehended the vast expanse of the world?
Come, tell me all this, if you know.
Which is the way home of light and where does the darkness dwell?
... have you visited the storehouse of the snow or seen the arsenal where
hail is stored.
[The questions keep coming.] ... Then Job answered the Lord:
I know that thou canst do all things and that no purpose is beyond thee.
But I have spoken of great things which I have not understood, things too
wonderful for me to know. I knew thee only by report but now I see thee with my
own eyes. Therefore I melt away; I repent in dust and ashes.¹*

This is one answer. Humans are way too limited in knowledge and experience to be able to understand the pain of living.

But there's another answer that I find more convincing. It is this: Notice that most of the cruelty that humans suffer is caused by human action. Think of the disparities of wealth and privilege. How much are they human artifacts? Subject to change if only we humans were to make different decisions? Think of the atrocities of the holocaust, genocide, global warming. Are they not the result of human words and actions? (Of course there are natural catastrophes, Tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, and so forth, but how much of the damage is exacerbated by human action. Is it any accident that the poor people of New Orleans suffered more than the rich?)

Can one believe in a God who loves us so much that God wishes us to love God freely, without compulsion? A God who loves purely? A God who leaves us to our own free will – use it or abuse it as we will; a God who doesn't intervene, but leaves it for our choice as to whether we align ourselves with divine love.

Such an image of God is akin to "tough love." In other words, we may need to suffer the consequences of our choices. God will encourage us to choose wisely, and will support us in discerning wisely, if we ask for God's help. But as in any relationship that is truly mutual, we must invite God in, even as God is always inviting us.

I used to sing African American gospel music with a choir named "Ebony and Ivory." At first I was puzzled by how folks could sing, "Jesus is a rock in a weary land." I certainly could imagine the "weary land" part. But I would be damned if I could resonate with the "rock" and with the image, as the song developed, of "a shelter in a time of storm." Then I got it! I realized that when you have nothing; when people look on your life as worthless; then an image of God where you were loved and mattered made all the difference. Because I had realized enough of this world's goodies, education,

¹ Excerpts for Job: Chapters 38-42, Oxford Study Edition of *The New English Bible*, 1976.

social status, the privilege of being white-skinned, I didn't need the crutch of faith to assure me, or so I would tell myself. But I could imagine myself as being in a difference place socially, economically that only a faith in God could sustain me.

I can imagine being in a Nazi cell – how despairing I would be - and scratching on the walls:

*I believe in the sun
Even when it is not shining,
And I believe in love
Even when there's no one there.*

*And I believe in God
Even when He is silent...*

I'm particularly struck by the story of Paul Farmer, a Doctor and Anthropologist who has given his life to eradicating "preventable" disease among a certain region of Haiti, and in other parts of the world through Partners in Health. Tracy Kidder tells Farmer's story in the book, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*.

Farmer witnessed such misery, such degradation, such unnecessary suffering. In addition to bringing the best medical science that he could to elimination of pain, he was drawn to liberation theology, the branch of Christian thinking most famous for articulating a "preferential option for the poor." In its reading of Christian scripture, these theologians, human-thinkers, highlighted the passages in which Jesus proclaimed a God who witnessed and supported the poor. I have an extended quote from Kidder's biography that represents Farmer's thinking:

He [Farmer] was already attracted to liberation theology. "A powerful rebuke to the hiding away of poverty," he called it. "A rebuke that transcends scholarly analysis." In Haiti, the essence of the doctrine came alive for him. Almost all the peasants he was meeting shared a belief that seemed like a distillation of liberation theology: "Everybody else hates us," they'd tell him, "but God loves the poor more. And our cause is just." The Marxists Farmer had read, and many of the intellectuals he knew, disdained religion, and it was true that some versions of Christianity, and more than a few missionaries, invited impoverished Haitians into what Pere Lafontant called "the cult of resignation," into accepting their lot patiently, anticipating the afterlife. But the Christianity of the peasants Farmer talked to had a different flavor: "the shared conviction that the rest of the world was wrong for screwing them over; and that someone, someone just and perhaps even omniscient, was keeping score. He felt drawn back toward Catholicism now, not by his own belief but in sympathy with theirs, as an act of what he'd call "solidarity." He told me, "It was really the experience of seeing people up there in Cange, or in some awful hospital, or at a funeral, or knowing that people were awaking in their huts to two rooms full of hungry kids and still going on. Religion was the one thing they still had."

How could a just God permit great misery? The Haitian peasants answered with a proverb... [literally] "God gives but doesn't share." This meant, as Farmer would later explain it, "God gives us humans everything we need to flourish, but he's not the one who's supposed to divvy up the loot. That charge was laid upon us. Liberation theologians had a similar answer: "You

*want to see where Christ crucified abides today? Go to where the poor are suffering and fighting back, and that's where He is."*²

In another place Kidder writes of Farmer:

The combination of Harvard and Haiti had begun to form a new kind of belief in Farmer. He would tell me years later: "The fact that any sort of religious faith was so disdained at Harvard and so important to the poor – not just in Haiti but elsewhere, too – made me even more convinced that faith must be something good."

*And if the landless peasants of Cange needed to believe that someone omniscient was keeping score, by now Farmer felt the need to believe something like that himself. In the peasant phrase, an unnecessary death was "a stupid death," and he was seeing a lot of those. "Surely someone is witnessing this horror show?" he'd say to himself. "I know it sounds shallow, the opiate thing, needing to believe, palliating pain, but it didn't feel shallow. It was more profound than other sentiments I'd known, and I was taken with the idea that in an ostensibly godless world that worshiped money and power, or more seductively, a sense of personal efficacy and advancement, like at Duke and Harvard, there was still a place to look for God, and that was in the suffering of the poor. You want to talk crucifixion? I'll show you crucifixion, you bastards."*³

That's another answer to the question, "How can one believe in God when there is so much suffering?" It's precisely the overwhelming degree of suffering that grounds God in the religious imagination.

Then there's the answer that Process Theologians have given. Forget the omnipotent, impassive, imperturbable God. That's an image of God that depends more on Greek concepts of perfection, than an image of God that is relational. A close reading of the stories told by Jews and Christians points to a God that is much more involved with human society. A God who suffers along with the humans, even as God urges them to a different kind of world. In this view, God is more of a partner than an overwhelming power, a kind of behind the scenes puppeteer. I've often said, from a Process Theological point of view, that God has no hands but our hands; no heart but our hearts. God is ever willing to enter into partnership with us, as we create the kind of world for which we and God long.

I don't know that I've convinced you to believe in God – I don't even know if I've convinced myself. Still I hope that I have muddied the water, and encouraged you to enter the complexity of human thought about God and the realization that life encounters so much pain.

If I have encouraged your soul to question more deeply, I will feel gratified. I don't like the thought of people rejecting a belief in God because there is so much suffering. Basta! Good people, smart people, have wrestled with these questions and have affirmed their faith in an image of God that includes an acknowledgement of how much pain there is in the world.

However we frame the answer to the question, may we be agents to bring healing to our world. Amen.

² Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, 2003, New York, Random House, 78-79.

³ *Ibid*, 85.