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Lynn Mitchell

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# By the Waters of Babylon: How Biblical Perspectives on Suffering Became Personal

LYNN MITCHELL

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By the rivers of Babylon—  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there  
we hung up our harps.  
For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”  
How could we sing the LORD’S song  
in a foreign land? (Ps 137:1–4)

## **AN INEXPLICABLE EXPERIENCE (IMPORTANT EXPERIENTIAL BACKGROUND TO PSALM 137)**

*Excruciating weeks have turned into loathsome months. The long, relentless siege of our lovely Zion ended without a single one of our prayers being answered. Prayers answered? My Lord, they were mocked. By the Babylonians? Of course. But by God himself? How could it be? I don’t know—but it’s true. He didn’t hear us. We did not hear from him—not a word of assurance, not a word of hope, and not a word of explanation.*

*What kind of answer is this: our young men slaughtered, our young mothers ripped open and our children dashed against the rocks. Not many, mind you. Only enough to break our hearts and crush our stubborn will. We are too valuable a commodity for our strength and blood to be wasted on the hot rocks of Arabia.*

*Our cattle and gold were not enough for them. Even the precious gold of the temple did not satisfy them. They had to desecrate the Holy of Holies, smash the walls—lay it open to the screech owls and wild dogs.*

*My Lord, we owned the temple of the Most High. If that could not protect us, what can? Nothing, obviously. No one—even he could not. The straps were painful, our feet were swollen, the smoke of destruction and the stench of death still scalded our nostrils. Here we were unceremoniously dumped in a strange, pagan land—full of stinking, arrogant, derisive foreigners. They loved it—the thrill of power to oppress.*

*But who had dumped us here? The Babylonians? Of course. But God himself? It must be true. Or could he just be impotent in the face of the great Merodach, or Marduk, or Bel—whatever his name is. We have come through his gates (Babylon meaning “Gate of God”). Our God didn’t or couldn’t follow.*

*What does it matter? Where is the Lord? Is he still under the rubble of Zion? Will we ever hear from him again? It’s obvious he can’t hear us—our prayers or our songs, and we certainly are in no mood to sing them. Where in the world is he? Who knows? Perhaps the Syrians, the Egyptians, or the Persians serve a god who is strong enough to rescue us. Perhaps they will come and dash the Babylonian children against the rocks. Then we will be happy.*

*But until then, there is only the shame, the horror, and the despair. Is it more than we can bear? Will it never end? Who knows? Maybe God knows.*

*We beg you, O Lord, wherever you are—please remember the day of Jerusalem’s destruction. Please, O Lord, wherever you are, remember us, if you can—if you will.*

### **A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE?**

The mourning and despair so poignantly expressed by this Psalm is, beyond doubt, an appropriate subject for inspired scripture to reflect upon. A less realistic reflection on life (i.e., avoiding reflection on mourning, grief, suffering, and death) would certainly not be very revealing or relevant to me.

Reflection on suffering should have its moments. Revelation concerning suffering and its relation to a loving God is indispensable to the fullness of scripture and to the development of faith that seeks the understanding of the gospel.

Of course, the complaint of Psalm 137 is not the last word. The question, “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” is a very good one; but it should not be left as merely a rhetorical question. It has an ultimate answer. The answer is not “of course we can’t.” Jeremiah and Ezekiel, two of the psalmist’s contemporary pastors, would answer quite differently. “Of course you can, in due and proper time;” that is, after you have worked through your pain in the light of the suffering love of God.

This word timely given might well have spared us the most horrible poetic expression of a self-pitying sufferer: “Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” (verse 9). That this horror still stands in the text does serve as a testimony to the fact that grief includes rage and that suffering is not very amenable to rational analysis.

Suffering is not like anything else. Philosophers may profitably reflect on many other realities, but they have been notably unsuccessful in providing plausible “reasons” for the existence of human suffering. Their success in providing comfort is even less impressive. Human reason may conclude that suffering is “just there” (naturalism), it is not really there, or that it really is there, but (“presto-chango”) it is good for you.

It seems that suffering, like the reality of God, is too important a subject to be left to the philosophers. It turns out, in fact, that reflection on suffering in light of biblical revelation also does not yield any rational “answers” to the problem of suffering any more than it offers rational proof for the existence of God.

The people of God in both the Old and New Testaments were too busy trying to hold up their part in the conversation with God. They did not devote very much time to the development of rational arguments for his existence. Similarly, the people of God were and are too busy suffering to dedicate much time to developing a rationally adequate explanation of suffering.

In the biblical faith, suffering is not a question to be contemplated; it is a seemingly intractable experience to be “suffered” in the light of the revelation of God. Unless we can learn the meaning of suffering from the revelation of God, there can be no meaning found in suffering. We need to converse with God rather than with our own intellect. As Martin Luther suggests, “From the moment a person begins a conversation with God, he becomes immortal.”

### **BEGINNING MY OWN CONVERSATION WITH GOD ABOUT SUFFERING**

Suffering is profoundly concrete and personal. “You gotta walk that lonesome valley, you gotta walk it by yourself, nobody else can walk it for you, you gotta walk it by yourself” (American folk song).

C.S. Lewis never repudiated his theologizing (and some philosophizing) in his early book *The Problem of Pain*. However, both he and most of his readers agree that his later work, *A Grief Observed*, is both shorter and qualitatively more profound in its reflection on suffering.

My early life was one of near poverty, body-aching work, and adolescent psychic-misery. But my first real “dark night of the soul” consumed most of the year 1963, while I was in college. The death of my younger brother on the way to his high school graduation party was the first life-blow that took my physical

and spiritual breath away. Having no understanding of grief and the process of its healing, I found myself spiraling down into a faith and spiritual crisis. The assassination of John Kennedy was a profound secondary blow to my psychic solar plexus. I had been an intensely committed disciple of the young president who represented for me the idealistic, almost utopian hopes of a young advocate of social ethics as I understood them. I collapsed into bed, lost my job, and now feel sure that I appeared almost catatonic to my roommate.

In light of my present thesis, I have an interpretation of the misery of that particular episode of my life. Despite the completion of class requirements for two degrees in Bible, I, as yet, was not in significant enough conversation with God. I was an accomplished doctrinal debater. But as I understand now, I did not really know the doctrine I could so nimbly debate. I had degrees in Bible, but God's revelation of himself and his revelation of my nature and condition had not yet registered in my spiritual P.C.

The major difference is that between reflection on the problem of pain and reflection on pain. Lewis, like each of us, is a valuable witness in that he knew suffering profoundly, and did not merely demonstrate a considerable knowledge about suffering. Thomas Aquinas in like manner did not repudiate the magnificent

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philosophical-theological work of his great life; he simply judged it to be "straw" vis-à-vis the vision of God he experienced in the waning years of his life.

My experience thus far has been less dramatic than that of either Aquinas or Lewis. But confidence in my "answer" to the problem of suffering grows through conversation with God as each year of suffering passes and he reveals to me the meaning of

my life—including my suffering. My first baby experience of feeling like Job is so minor (in hindsight) that I am somewhat embarrassed to tell the story. But it is my story and I can only tell my story; it is hard to comment significantly about the story of someone else with any assurance.

According to John, Jesus painfully rebuked the Jews in the following words: "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf" (John 5:39). I knew about the Bible and about Christ, but I did not know Christ very well. Consequently, I was not prepared to know suffering concretely and personally. I was no more prepared to suffer in a redemptive way than Eve was prepared really to know good and evil. It was devastating.

But my redemption was dawning. My roommate dropped on my bed table a December 1963 edition of *The Saturday Evening Post*. It had no news about Kennedy's assassination. What it had was a letter of rebuke from God in the form of an article by a man I had never read: "We Have No Right to Happiness," by C.S. Lewis. I am not sure that Lewis' article immediately convinced me at the time; but it did present me with a statement of Christian faith dealing with issues of life and death that was stark, depressingly realistic, and full of doctrinal integrity. I had read many Christian theological-ethical essays that probably conveyed the truth, but this was the first such essay that gave me strong subjective confidence that it was a true reflection of Christian thinking on the problem of human misery.

Lewis' article pointed me back to previous brushes with wisdom on the meaning of affliction. I recall riding back to Abilene Christian College on a cold winter night and hearing on the radio the most riveting "gospel" sermon I had ever heard. It was not on a *subject*. It was a reflection on a story: "The Slaying of the Innocents" (Matt 2:13-18). The sermon was by Oswald Hoffman of *The Lutheran Hour*. More than 30 years later, I made my way to a little Lutheran church in Houston to shake his hand and tell him that I had first heard a truly "soul-stirring" explication of scripture on that Abilene highway. I remembered it over and over again as I later tried to learn how to open the scriptures to an assembly of people. Somewhat later, I heard a sermon by one of my early preaching heroes in the Church of Christ, Virgil Trout. I had attended a church service in Abilene with a budding young missionary. Virgil opened up the conversation God wanted to have

with me about the experience of Job and what it would mean for my lifelong struggle with him. It may have been the second time in my life that I had heard what I would later call an “existential” experience of God’s speaking to me through a preacher. Most of what I had heard before was “doctrinal” (teaching) but it did not teach me. I did not know anything about Virgil’s life experience (and still do not), but I knew that he knew Job. My revelational ecstasy was short-lived. I inquired of my (future) missionary friend, “What did you think of that?” “Oh, it was all right, I guess, but I’m more of a meat and potatoes man myself,” he replied.

Other than similar brushes with the wisdom of existence from some special teachers, most of my fare continued to be “doctrinal” meat and potatoes. I was hardly prepared for the dry bread of even the slightest affliction. From Lewis, Oswald, and Virgil, however, I was able to move haltingly in the direction to which they pointed, that is, to the suffering God. I turned hungrily to steeping myself vicariously (however weakly) in the experiences of C.S. Lewis and Job, and then I turned more importantly to the vicarious suffering of Christ and the suffering of the God compelled by love and revealed in Jesus Christ.

From years of trying to begin to feel what Job felt, I learned that I could not (God forbid). But I could slowly yet progressively appreciate what God was attempting to reveal to me through Job and later through Jeremiah, Isaiah, and the Psalms. For me, the suffering of God’s people in the Hebrew scriptures became a profound preparation for receiving the gospel. I began to realize that, though I could recite the gospel story, I simply could not experience very profoundly its meaning for my existence, my life.

The story of Job is a cautionary tale. It is the story of “a good member of the church” trudging along for years with a “doctrinal” theology that was not adequate to carry him through even the first week of his affliction. If you go from the top to the miserable bottom in the course of a few minutes, and if you have lost almost everything that could prop up a reasonably strong piety, you can at least depend on your wife and your friends, right? Sometimes not. If you have lost all the tangible props for your psyche, at least you have your theology to lean on, right? Probably not. Your theology will probably not hold the weight. It is always inadequate—always too human. This is where you start making whimpering sounds about losing your faith. And it is on this point that teachers of the church must be clear in order to prepare for affliction and to comfort others in their affliction. Job was probably sorely tempted to abandon his faith. But he did not. What he abandoned was his theology. Theology is not faith; it is the human attempt to understand the implications of one’s faith. Theology does not save anyone; it is merely our woefully inadequate attempt to understand how we are being saved.

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The Lord, we must note, never hints that Job had an adequate theology. He witnessed only to Job’s faith (“one who feared God”). God, in fact, was complicit in the utter destruction of the theological “certainties” of Job and his friends. By the time God gets through with Job, nothing was left but Job’s faith, his fear of the Lord.

The story of Job, we learn, is not a philosophical reflection on the problem of suffering. It is not a failed attempt to “answer” the question of suffering. It is a reflection on what it means to “fear the Lord.” We learn the answer to Satan’s question, “Does Job fear God for nothing?” (Job 1:9). The answer to that question is Yes, Job feared God for naught—for no reason. The fear of the Lord is not the result of an adequate apologetic (defense of the faith) or theodicy (defense of God’s character in the light of the problem of evil). It is the only proper relationship between God the creator and his human creature—period. If we do not trust God, there is no help from anywhere.

It is Job who voices the sufferer's version of Psalm 8:4–8.

What are human beings, that you make so much of them,  
 that you set your mind on them,  
 visit them every morning,  
 test them every moment?  
 Will you not look away from me for a while,  
 let me alone until I swallow my spittle? (Job 7:17–19)

There is no need to quote more statements of desperation and depression from Job. We all can read for ourselves. However, we may have in Job what constitutes the most profound and poignant unintentional prophecy in the Hebrew Bible. While Job finds it hard to find an opportunity to spit without the painful attention of God, he more than once voices a plaintive yearning for the assurance of the gospel he does not yet know.

“If mortals die, will they live again?” (Job 14:14). Job does not know. God's conversation with his people had not yet broached that subject in clear terms. But despite the paucity of revelation on that subject, Job, in light of his experience and what he believes about God's love and justice, ventures an unfocused wish:

Oh that you would hide me in Sheol,  
 that you would conceal me until your wrath is past,  
 that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me! . . .  
 All the days of my service I would wait  
 until my release should come.  
 You would call, and I would answer you;  
 you would long for the work of your hands. (Job 14:13–15)

Given the gospel, Job's wish is finally God's command. “Job, come forth!” God ultimately cries. Lazarus' story and the gospel of Jesus Christ cannot remain mere doctrinal allusions to a life after death. The gospel story—the life of the suffering servant, the death of the forsaken Jesus, the resurrection and glorification of the Messiah of God—this is the “answer” to the problem of suffering. Christ did not explain suffering, instead he suffered. He did not call us to the escape from suffering under the Bodhi tree (Buddha); he called us to our own crosses. “When Christ calls [a person], he calls him to come and die” (Bonhoeffer).

In addition to the “subconscious” gospel according to Job, the Hebrew Bible also contains such revealing jewels as the gospel according to Hosea, in which the immense suffering of God in relation to his beloved people is depicted. This was seven hundred years before Christ revealed the incredible extent and profundity of that suffering for us.

The gospel according to Ezekiel responds to the suffering of the Jews by the rivers of Babylon by revealing to God's people in exile that hanging up their harps, like Job complaining, may be understandable, but it is only temporarily appropriate. In fact, Ezekiel tells them their suffering is real, but their interpretation of it (like Job's) is erroneous. The throne of God does not remain in a destroyed heap in the temple in Jerusalem as they imagined. In fact, the throne of God is mobile. See those cherubim with the wheels? The throne of God is as real and effective in its new place, high above the river of Chebar, as it was in the temple at Jerusalem: those bones shall live (Ezek 37:3). You may gingerly lift your harps from the limbs of the willows and praise the Lord for his faithfulness and his steadfast love. To the forlorn, idle, Hebrew musicians on the banks of the Chebar, that greatest self-proclaimed suffering servant of God in the Old Testament rises above his complaining to proclaim, “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness” (Lam 3:23).

Thus the answer to the question of suffering is the answer to the question of who and where is God: "The sufferings of this present time are not to be compared to the glory that is to be revealed. . . . In everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:18, 28).

The love of God and the meaning of his suffering, as well as our suffering, are only experientially and eschatologically verifiable. That is, we will only recognize them in the present and in the hereafter when we see it happening. For this reason, the virtues accompanying suffering must be painful conversation, hopeful endurance, and trusting praise.

### **HIGHER LEVEL CONVERSATION (WITH GOD ABOUT CRYING)**

A much darker "night of the soul" for me than the relative twilight of 1963 was the black excruciating oppression of 1993–1996. My teenaged daughter began a spiral into the vortex of adoption issues, self-destruction, adolescent confusion, and chemicals. I learned that not only could I not find it within me to sing a song of Zion, but sometimes (often) I could do nothing but cry and scream unashamedly in the solitude of an automobile on a crowded freeway. I wept more each day than I had wept in all the days of my life before. I saw no hope. I felt almost certain we would lose her and I would simply die. I knew intellectually Paul's assurance of what God does for those who love him. But I was not saved or even comforted much by my theology. I survived and came out on the other side, not because of the sophistication of my religious thought, but because of what God did without my help in the face of my despair. I could only stand back and watch. The watch was worth it. The pain was eased and turned into joy. A wonderfully loving and mature young mother and two breathtakingly beautiful and welcome grandchildren arose out of what had appeared only to be chaos. God had kept me alive. Like the Jews from Babylon, we emerged as a family out of the misery of oppression into blessed relief and tremendous joy.

"Weeping may linger for the night. But joy comes with the morning" (Ps 30:5). But not always. My wife, Carol, tells me that if we had lost Anne, I would not have survived. She may be right. That is where eschatological hope supersedes experiential sophistication. We need to remember that we have no right to happiness. But the truth remains: we shall be healed—God will wipe away all tears from our eyes; pain and death will be no more. Joy will come in the morning—but perhaps not tomorrow. The "morning of joy" of which we used to sing is ultimately our last hope. It is our ultimate hedge against despair: that the God we trust will long for the work of his hands; he shall call and we will answer.

### **A FINAL WORD**

Although suffering is intractably personal, and although we must walk it by ourselves, we dare not try to walk it alone. Our fellow sufferers are available to us. In view of our plight, this turns out to be an ironic but inestimable gift. Because of their own experience, they can suffer with us, commiserate with us. We need teachers to teach us, comforters to comfort us, encouragers to encourage us. In short, we desperately need each other, as the people of God, able to share the revelations each of us has received in our own conversations with God.

Beyond all of this, it is obvious from the biblical perspective that we would be completely lost were it not for having as our shepherd the suffering Lord. In the "Valley of the Shadow of Death," we need not fear evil as though it is the final word because he is with us. He comforts us, and he will uphold us through our "vale of tears" and shepherd us to that place and time where there will be no more tears.

There is an old folk prayer I used to hear as a child: "Lord, when our work on earth is done, give us a home in heaven with thee and that will be enough." That will be enough? I should say so.

LYNN MITCHELL

Dr. Mitchell is Resident Scholar in Religion and Director of Religious Studies at the University of Houston and a member of the Editorial Board of *Leaven*.