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## "If I Should Die Before I wake. . .": The Death of Children and the Story of Job

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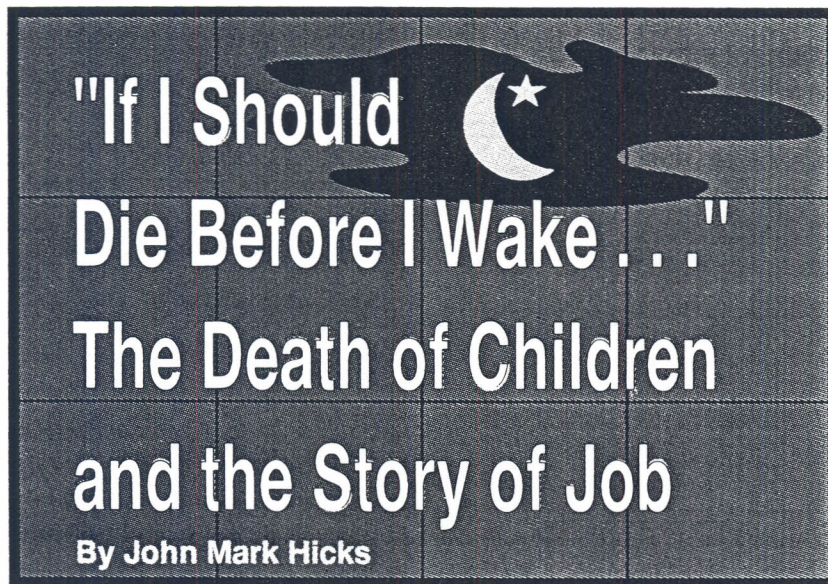
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At the center of Dostoyevski's nineteenth-century novel *The Brothers Karamazov* is the suffering and meaningless death of children. It is a thread that runs throughout the novel, from the story of a mother who desperately visits one monastery after another hoping for a vision of her dead child, to the lament by Captain Snegirev over the death of his son Iljusta. At a climactic point in the novel, Ivan Karamazov, who states the case for modern nihilism better than Nietzsche, argues that God cannot be the center of meaning if children suffer pointlessly. As evidence, Ivan offers examples of Turkish atrocities in Bulgaria where children are cut from their mothers' wombs and infants are impaled on bayonets. Ivan protests that even if their suffering were a "necessary payment for truth," then that "truth is not worth such a price." Would you erect a building, Ivan asks, on the foundation of such suffering? Would you "consent to be the architect" if human happiness meant "that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death" babies? How, then, could God?<sup>1</sup>

Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor, has also made the suffering of children a major theme of his reflections. In *Night*, the powerful account of his suffering in Nazi concentration camps, he recalls the night when he first saw the flames of Auschwitz. The flames that consumed innocent children "consumed [his] faith forever" and "murdered [his] God."<sup>2</sup> In fact, Wiesel took God to court in his play *The Trial of God*.<sup>3</sup> The witnesses against God are the millions who died. The witnesses against God include a million children who were butchered in the Holocaust. "Let their premature, unjust deaths," the prosecutor Berish demands, "turn into an outcry so forgetful that it will make the universe tremble with fear and remorse!"<sup>4</sup> God cannot be defended; he cannot be justified in the face of this evil. In fact, in Wiesel's play, only Satan is God's defender. God, in Wiesel's view, no longer acts justly. The prosecutor, near the end of the trial, shouts his protest to God and tells him that "He's more guilty than ever!"<sup>5</sup> The blood of a million children is on the hands of God. God is responsible for his

world. Wiesel understands this. But the modern believer shrinks back from that thought.

The modern world understands the question. Indeed, the seeming horror of the possible answer drives some to a deism (where God allows the world to run much

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like we watch a clock tick), and drives others to revise their concept of God (perhaps he is not as powerful or loving as we thought). Can God really be responsible for this world where radical evil is so pervasive? The modern believer seeks to absolve God, to justify him by removing him from involvement in the world or by understanding ("forgiving") his limitations. We want to isolate God from the problem; push him back into a corner where we can justify him. We must defend God; or, at least, we must make excuses for him. There is only so much God can do. He has his limitations. God does the best he can do with the world he has made; he does the most he can do.<sup>6</sup> We must understand God's predicament. We must forgive him.<sup>7</sup> Wiesel will have none of this coddling of God. God is responsible, or he is not God.

My Joshua is now ten. He has a genetic condition known as Sanfilippo Syndrome A. He can no longer communicate verbally. His mental age is about nine to twelve months. He still wears diapers. He can walk, but if he is not assisted he will stumble and fall after several steps. It will not be long before he cannot walk at all. He will eventually be bedridden. He will die a lingering death unless his heart or liver or pneumonia takes him first. Suffering has again (my first wife died in 1980) entered my life and the life of my family. It has attacked one of my children. Suffering has engaged my family once again through Joshua, my child.

Now my joy, my investment in the future, is gone; my only son will soon die. He will not be the leader among God's people for whom we named him. He will not fulfill our hopes and dreams for him. He will not even play little league baseball, or ever again say the words "I love you." His suffering will end one day, but we sense that ours never will.

What do we say when we are faced with the startling fact that innocent children suffer and die? Some die from the cruelty of others, as in the Holocaust. Others die in earthquakes and tornadoes, as recent events evidence. Others die from debilitating genetic and infectious conditions. The suffering and eventual death of children, for whatever reason they may die, is the most gut-wrenching and lamentable event in human experience. It is an eventuality that we would all prevent if we could. Why does not God prevent it? God could heal Joshua, but he hasn't yet. God could have prevented the slaughter of innocents in the Holocaust as he did in the days of Esther, but he did not. God saved Moses, but other children in Egypt? God saved Jesus, but other infants in Bethlehem were slaughtered. Is the death of children something God begrudgingly permits when he could prevent it? Why would God permit such evil?

Because of my experience with Joshua, the story of Job reads a bit differently now. When I read that God protected Job's health in the first test, and then his life in the second test, I wonder why God did not protect Job's children. Why did not God keep his hedge around Job's children just as he kept it around Job's life? The power was in God's hands. God placed power into the hands of Satan, but with restrictions (1:12; 2:6). He determined the kind of power he would put into the hand of Satan, and he determined the limits of that power. God bears the ultimate responsibility for the evil that came upon Job because it did not have to come at all (cf. 2:10; 42:7). God could have kept the "hedge" in place, or he could have prevented what Satan sought to implement. God could have refused Satan's request. It was God's hand, moved to action, that resulted in the trouble Job suffered (1:11; 2:5). Though Satan may have been the direct agent, God was responsible. He was at least responsible both in the sense that he gave Satan the permission and in the sense that he gave Satan the power! God could have refused Satan's challenge; he could have restricted Satan further than he did. He could have said, "Satan, you can destroy his property, but not his children." God sovereignly decided to test Job in the context of Satan's question, "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9). God decided to open Job's children for attack in order to answer Satan's question.

After the first disaster, Job responded, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (1:21). Job attributes the giving of his children and the taking of his children to the Lord. If the Lord is to be praised for the giving of his blessings, the Lord must also be blessed for the taking away of his blessings. Job, in the clearest of terms, asserts God's responsibility for his predicament. The Lord gave, and the Lord took away. God is as active in the taking as he is in the giving. Nevertheless, Job blessed God. After the second disaster, Job responded similarly, "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (2:10). Literally, the Hebrew term translated "trouble" means "evil," as in 1:1,8; 2:3. God gives good things, but he sometimes also gives "evil." God sometimes brings prosperity, but at other times, creates disasters (Isa 45:7). According to Job, people of faith must be willing to accept both. The wise one of Ecclesiastes recognized this principle as well (Ecc 7:13-14):

Consider what God has done:  
Who can straighten what he has made crooked?  
When times are good, be happy,  
but when times are bad [evil], consider:  
God has made the one as well as the other.

This acceptance for Job meant the acceptance of his children's death. God is sovereign, and Job is still a person of faith. But the acceptance of his children's death did not come without questioning, doubt, and despair. As we read through the dialogues, we find Job often impatient, bitter, and accusatory. Nevertheless, we find a person of faith; we find one who will not succumb to the temptation to curse God or to give up his faith-commitment.

The friends who come to comfort Job, however, find a negative message in the death of Job's children. Bildad speculates that the children were sinners like Job. Protesting that God does not "pervert justice," he confidently asserts, "When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin" (8:4). The cruelty (and falsity) of such a statement is apparent to the reader of the prologue. Eliphaz implies that if Job had been more righteous, his children would still be with him (5:25). Indeed, one consequence of a person's wickedness, according to Bildad, is that "he has no offspring or descendants among his people" (18:19). No doubt, that was a stinging point for Job's heart. The loss of his children, according to Bildad, is a sign of Job's wickedness. Apparently, when the disciples asked, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2), Bildad would have answered,

"Both!" "Surely," Bildad concludes, "such is the dwelling of an evil man; such is the place of one who knows not God" (18:21).

But the readers of the prologue understand that this is not the reason at all. Job saw to the spiritual needs of his children (1:5), and the death of his children had nothing to do with them per se, but with Job. Could it be that to test some individuals, God permits the death of others? God could have restricted the test to Job's property. He could

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have restricted it to the health of his children as opposed to their deaths, just like he did with Job himself in the second test. But God did not keep his "hedge" around Job's children. He opened them up to Satan's attack for the purpose of testing Job. The meaning of the death of Job's children is found in the testing of Job. Job's children die as part of a trial where Job's faith is put into the dock.

It is the nature of the trial that is crucial here. The radical nature of the test implied the destruction of all that Job cherished as a blessing from God. The question was: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9). If the test was to be thorough, if it was to address the question fully, then every profit for serving God, every blessing, had to be removed. Anything that remained, especially Job's children, might be considered a prop for Job's faith. If his children were still alive, if his wife were supportive, if he could sell his sheep to feed his family, then Job could look to each of these "goods" as God's blessing, the reward for his faith. Thus the test had to extend even to Job's health. In order for Job's faith to be fully tested, *every* prop had to be removed.

The necessity for the radical character of the test is indicated by Satan himself. After the first test, Satan concluded that Job was even more selfish than he had initially thought. Job was really only concerned about himself. "Skin for skin," Satan asserts (2:4). Job did not really care about his servants, his property or his children. He only cares about himself, his own skin. "Strike Job himself—in his own skin," Satan predicts, "and then he will curse you." The

suffering was radical, because the test went to the heart of faith. The radical nature of the test demanded a severe testing. Will Job fear God even when he has no vested interest (no family, no property, no security, no health) in fearing God? Will Job fear God despite his radical suffering? Philip Yancey has focused the issue well in his article entitled "When the Facts Don't Add Up":

Do human beings truly possess freedom and dignity? Satan challenged God on that count. We have freedom to descend, of course—Adam and all his offspring have proved that. But do we have freedom to ascend, to believe God for no other reason than, well . . . for no reason at all. Can a person believe even when God appears to him as an enemy? Is that kind of faith even possible? Or is faith, like everything else, a product of environment and circumstances? These are the questions posed in the Book of Job. In the opening chapters, Satan reveals himself as the first great behaviorist. Job was conditioned to love God, he claims. Take away the rewards, and watch faith crumble. Job, oblivious, is selected for the great contest.<sup>8</sup>

Job himself saw this point, though he was unaware of the dimensions of the test. I believe one of the clearest expressions of faith in Job is found in his response to Zophar's tirade that God punishes the wicked and that their prosperity is short-lived (20:5). The fate of the wicked is God's wrath (20:28–29), according to Zophar. But Job is impatient with such an explanation of his situation and he complains, "Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power?" (21:7). More pointedly, "They see their children established around them, their offspring before their eyes. Their homes are safe and free from fear" (21:7–9a). And, "They send forth their children as a flock; their little ones dance about" (21:11). The wicked spend their lives in prosperity and they go to the grave in peace (21:13). Where is the suffering of the wicked? Their children are alive, their homes are safe, and "the rod of God is not upon them" (21:9b). Where is God's wrath? It is not there, "so," Job responds, "how can you console me with your nonsense? Nothing is left of your answers but falsehood" (21:34).

It is in this context that Job rejects the counsel of the wicked. The wicked, according to Job, question the profit of faith. They ask, "Who is the Almighty, that we should serve him? What would we gain by praying to him?" This is the critical question. It is a question about profit or gain.

What value is there in serving God? What advantage does one gain by praying? These are the questions and accusations of Satan. People serve God only for what they can get from God. They serve God for profit. The wicked speak for Satan. But Job will have none of this. “But their prosperity,” he comments, “is not in their own hands, so I stand aloof from the counsel of the wicked” (21:16). Job does not serve God for profit. He will not join the wicked, but he will maintain his faith-commitment even when his questions are not answered, his doubts are still present, and his pain is overwhelming. Job’s faith-commitment in 21:16 does not answer the questions of 21:17–33; nevertheless, his commitment remains. It is Job’s version of the father’s plea to Jesus: “I believe, but help me overcome my unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

In the aftermath of their children’s death, religious parents generally respond with one of three bereavement theodicies: blame God (“God is unjust”), blame themselves (“God is punishing me”), or seek some hidden purpose in the event (“This has happened for a reason”).<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the book of Job reflects all three perspectives. Job questions the justice of God, the friends blame Job or his own children, but the narrator sees purpose and meaning in their death. The fundamental meaning of the death of Job’s children was to test (not punish) Job’s faith, to answer the question “Does Job serve God for profit?” The answer was “No, he does not.” Job serves God because, well, God is God.

As I reflect on the eventual death of my own child, I draw comfort and meaning from the story of Job and his children. I know God is not punishing me for some great sin in my life, but I do believe he is refining my family, testing us to see the nature of our faith-commitment. Like Job, I believe God “knows the way I take, [and] when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold” (23:10). But also like Job, my prayers are often impatient, occasionally accusatory, and sometimes bitter. Nevertheless, I do not, if I know my heart, serve God for profit. I serve him because he has been gracious to me and seeks fellowship with me through love rather than through some *quid pro quo* profit transaction.

What “truth” is worth the price of our children? That “truth” is the reality of one’s fellowship with God on the ground of God’s sovereign, loving grace rather than through some profit, received as remuneration or merit. I will entrust my Joshua to God’s loving care, and, like Job (1:21), I hope to bless the name of God when Joshua is gone. My

faith, I pray, does not depend upon whether Joshua lives or dies. My faith, I pray, rests in my relationship with the God who seeks communion with me and the God who will one day wipe away every tear. One day God will remove the death shroud from the face of his people (Isa 25:7). The hard truth is that such a relationship—an eschatological relationship that includes innocent children like my Joshua—is worth the death of my child. But it is a truth against which I often protest and over which I daily weep. “O Lord,” I cry, “I believe, but help me overcome my unbelief.”

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Alexandra Kropotkin (Garden City, NY: Literary Guild of America, Inc., 1949), 179–80.

<sup>2</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway (New York: Avon Books, 1960).

<sup>3</sup> Elie Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Random House, 1964).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>6</sup> This is Frank Tupper’s response to the death of children, even though he makes it clear that such an event “defies responsible theological explanation,” *A Scandalous Providence: The Jesus Story of the Compassion of God* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), 75; see pages 78–81, 116–19.

<sup>7</sup> This is also the theme of Harold S. Kushner’s *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1981), 43, 58–9, 148.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Yancey, “When the Facts Don’t Add Up,” *Christianity Today* 30, June 13 (1986): 20. Yancey gives a fuller treatment in his book *Disappointment with God: Three Questions No One Asks Aloud* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 155–246.

<sup>9</sup> Judith A. Cook and Dale W. Wimberley, “If I Should Die Before I Wake: Religious Commitment and Adjustment to the Death of a Child,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 22 (September 1983): 228–30. Although infrequent, some explain the event in terms of coincidence, accident, or the course of nature (228). That thought never occurred to the author of Job. You may notice that I have partially borrowed my title from this article.