

# OUT of THE ASHES

God's Presence in Job's Pain



**Bill Crowder**



## *introduction*

# Out of the Ashes: God's Presence in Job's Pain

**T**he “**law of the harvest**” is easy to understand. Like produces like. As the apostle Paul writes to the first-century church in Galatia, “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap” (GALATIANS 6:7).

The same idea was expressed much earlier in the book of Job. One of Job's friends, implying that somehow Job deserved the calamities that had ambushed him, asked, “Remember now, who ever perished being innocent? Or where were the upright ever cut off? Even as I have

seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same" (JOB 4:7-8).

As it turns out, the law of the harvest can be one of the most misleading of all ideas. For that reason alone, I hope that the following pages written by Bill Crowder get a wide reading and stir up renewed interest in one of the most ancient and important stories of the Bible.

*Mart DeHaan*

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*one*

## Hard Questions, Elusive Answers

**W**ith biting irony, Woody Allen declared, "Life is full of misery, loneliness, and suffering, and it's all over much too soon." Allen wasn't telling us something we didn't already know. Pain and suffering are woven into our common human experience. Suffering erupts globally through war, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, typhoons. It expresses itself personally: loss of a relationship, loss of health, loss of a child, loss of a marriage, loss of a job. Suffering touches us in ways we are usually unprepared for. It seizes us with pain we cannot define. It affects us physically,

emotionally, relationally, spiritually. In suffering, we slam up against a nameless, faceless, heartless enemy. And that enemy evokes questions for which we have inadequate answers.

Yet, difficult as they are, those very questions compel our search for better answers. We read books. We consult thinkers, philosophers, theologians, and teachers. We argue and debate explanations of the problem of suffering. But no matter how high our expectations or how promising these sources appear, they leave us with unanswered questions—maddening mysteries that either drive us away from God or draw us to Him.

In the pages of this booklet, we can examine only a few of the questions swirling like a cyclone around this difficult issue. What is suffering like? How do we respond when suffering calls our name? How can God be found in the midst of life's darkest moments?

There is no better starting point from which to view suffering than through the experiences of a man named Job. His story is told in the oldest book of the Bible.

Job lived in the land of Uz in the earliest times of recorded human history. He is introduced as a man



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who lived in relationship to God and is described as “blameless,” “upright,” and a man who “shunned evil” (Job 1:1). He sought to do right and to please God. Yet a rapid series of cataclysmic events shattered his world and threatened that relationship.

It is telling that the oldest book in the Bible focuses on the common denominator of human experience—the problem of pain and suffering. Though Job’s story is familiar to many, it has more to say than we might imagine. More about our world, more about us, and more about God.





two

## A Heart Torn In Pieces

**T**here are certain lessons that we prefer to keep theoretical and abstract. But in that environment, they can never be fully understood. Professor Howard Hendricks once said that there are no correspondence courses in swimming. Nor are there any distance-learning experiences in suffering—only deeply, inescapably personal ones. When in the vise of suffering, what is it that we experience that contributes to the burdensome difficulty of it all? Following are several insights from Job's experience.

### **Suffering Feels Mysterious** (Job 1:1-12)

Primo Levi, a prisoner in the Auschwitz concentration camp

during World War II, described a time when, huddled in his barracks and parched with thirst, he reached through the window for an icicle to provide some moisture for his dry mouth. But before he could wet his cracked lips, a guard snatched the icicle away and shoved him back from the window. Shocked by such unkindness, Levi asked the guard why. The guard responded, "Here there is no why."

That is how life feels sometimes. It feels as if we suffer with no reasonable answer to our *why*, only silence that seems to sneer *why not*. Job must have felt that way when he entered the crucible of suffering. <sup>▮</sup> He had no idea of the spiritual backdrop to his life. In fact, Job is offstage for the opening scene of his story. Job 1 tells of a gathering of angelic beings before God's throne, including Satan, when something remarkable happens: "Then the LORD said to Satan, 'Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?' So Satan answered the LORD and said, 'Does Job fear God for nothing?'" (JOB 1:8-9).

God questions Satan, our spiritual enemy, about his observations of men and women on the earth by highlighting and even bragging about Job. But Satan pushes back on God's commendation. He questions Job's motives

<sup>▮</sup> *Because of the fall of the human race through its sin, **suffering** is a common experience to all people. While we experience suffering in different degrees and in different forms, suffering is a universal human experience. This is why stories of perseverance are so powerful.*

for loving God: *Why shouldn't he serve You?* Satan implies. *You gave him everything!* And so God grants Satan permission to test Job's faith. Job is to be part of a cosmic experiment, and suffering will be the variable in testing the purity of his devotion to and relationship with God.

This exchange between God and Satan clearly shows that our lives are connected to the eternal spiritual realm. But it also shows that Job was completely unaware of the reason for his suffering—he only knew the suffering. The cause was a mystery.

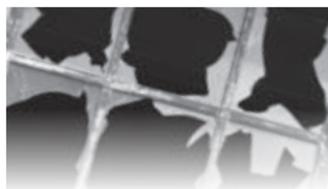
As Os Guinness put it, "Life is not just difficult. Life turns out to be unfair, and cosmically unfair in a way that is terrifying. After that, the ground no longer seems so firm."

As the sudden onslaught of pain, grief, and loss engulfed him, Job's heart beat with questions that had no answers.

## **Suffering Feels Overwhelming** (Job 1:13-19)

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Claudius says, "When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions." This was certainly true of Job's experience; one messenger after another came bringing him news of devastating loss.

*Now there was a day when his sons and daughters were*



*That is how life feels sometimes. It feels as if we suffer with no reasonable answer to our why, only silence that seems to sneer why not.*

*eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house; and a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them, when the Sabaeans raided them and took them away—indeed they have killed the servants with the edge of the sword; and I alone have escaped to tell you!" While he was still speaking, another also came and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them; and I alone have escaped to tell you!" While he was still speaking, another also came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three bands, raided the camels and took them away, yes, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; and I alone have escaped to tell you!" While he was still speaking, another also came and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, and suddenly a great wind came from across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; and I alone have escaped to tell you!" (JOB 1:13-19 emphasis added)*

Rapid-fire reports of devastating loss ripped into Job's heart. Servants practically tripped over each other as they arrived with more bad news. In Job's world, wealth was measured in terms of servants and property. Both were weapons in the assault on Job's heart. First, it was the loss of donkeys and oxen and the death of servants (1:14-15). Then came word that the "fire of God fell from heaven," consuming Job's sheep and more servants (1:16). Next came the message that Chaldean raiders had stolen the camels and killed even more servants (1:17). With each

announcement, the stakes rose as the losses became greater and greater. But the greatest loss came when the messenger arrived with the heart-wrenching news that Job's sons and daughters had been killed (1:18-19).

When waves of heartache wash over us, whether single spies or whole battalions, their sheer weight and relentless nature can be suffocating. Suffering simply overwhelms us.

## **Suffering Is Experienced Alone** (Job 2:13)

*So they sat down with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his grief was very great (JOB 2:13).*

Satan's final assault was on Job's health (2:1-8). After that, Job sat in the dust scratching painful sores, bewildered by the turn his life had taken. Job's wife and friends were with him, but in reality he was alone in his pain—alone but for the presence of his God.

Simone Weil, a 20th century French philosopher, wrote, "Affliction makes God appear to be absent for a time, more absent than a dead man, more absent than light in the utter darkness of a cell. A kind of horror submerges the whole soul."

The sense of isolation in seasons of suffering was given voice in the grief-stricken wail that left the lips of Christ on the cross: "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? . . . My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" (MATTHEW 27:46). That also must have been the cry of Job's heart as well, as he sat in the dust grieving his great losses.

Across the millennia, neither the nature nor the causes

of suffering have changed. For some, suffering will never approach the horrors of Job's experience. For others, it may actually surpass them. But in each case, our suffering is uniquely our own and we feel the weight of that suffering because it is mysterious, overwhelming, and ultimately experienced alone.



*three*

## A War On Two Fronts

**W**ar historians attribute Adolf Hitler's loss of World War II in large part to his decision to attack Russia while already embroiled in his war against England. Military leaders caution against trying to fight a war on two fronts—it almost always ends badly. Division of resources, energy, strategy, and attention make the two-front war virtually unwinnable.

Job faced the unwelcome prospect of a war on two fronts. His was not a war over land or a battle fought with weapons. His was a spiritual battle waged on the emotional landscape of his broken heart. The first battle was against his "friends"

over his integrity. The second and more painful conflict was with the God he trusted and served.

What is interesting in Job's story is the way it is told. Often we focus on the suffering Job experienced. It was so horrific that it defies understanding. However, Scripture recounts these tragedies in only two chapters (1–2) and spends the remaining 40 chapters of the book of Job recounting Job's wrestling match with his friends and with God over the reason for his suffering.

## With Friends Like These . . .

When news of tragedy first reached Job, he responded with profound faith and confidence: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (JOB 1:21). However, those powerful words of trust would soon fade into a darker, more painful tone. The first push toward the cliff of despair came from Job's wife,<sup>1</sup> who no doubt was grieving the loss of their children as well. With angry cynicism she encouraged her husband to "curse God and die" (2:9). Though he refused, the introduction to Job's speech in chapter 3 shows the weight of his suffering and its effect on his faith and resolve: "After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth" (JOB 3:1).

<sup>1</sup> **Job's wife** is often portrayed as a faithless person. But how would any of us have responded in her position? She, like Job, had lost her children and her wealth. Now she was forced to watch her husband suffer with sickness and disease.

Job's glowing faith had been subdued by the grief and suffering that had invaded his life. His cry of lament reached a painful crescendo as he declared: "Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter of soul, who long for death, but it does not come, and search for it more than hidden treasure?" (JOB 3:20-21).

What arrived instead of death was an experience of darkest night—troubles and fears that robbed him of even the hope of peace (vv. 22-26).

As though the pain were not already unbearable, Job's song of lament is met with cynicism and judgment. As he stood before watching spectators, unable and perhaps unwilling to hide his pain and grief, accusations not sympathy, condemnation not comfort came in waves—just like the tragedies had days earlier. His wife's "advice" was only the beginning.

For seven days, Job's friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) had sat silently and observed his agony (JOB 2:13). On day eight, they unleashed a storm of criticism (JOB 4–31).<sup>1</sup> The waves followed a similar pattern: accusation and Job's response. The three friends applied their theological scrutiny to Job's experience. Their tactic? Each of them accused Job of a lack of integrity in claiming

👉 *Like Job's friends, **we tend to say too much** when attempting to comfort the sufferer. In times of suffering we should resist the temptation to "speak for God" even if our intentions are purely motivated. In the crucible of suffering, words are usually not sufficient.*

a righteous life. *You must be hiding some gross sin*, they said. *After all, God does not punish the innocent.* When Job adamantly defended his innocence and rebuffed their accusations, his friends went on the offensive and assaulted the already emotionally, spiritually, and physically wounded man. The relentless assaults left everyone weary and drained from a war that in the end proved futile.

↳ People typically take one of two approaches when dealing with someone who is enduring suffering. The first approach is **philosophical**—it tries to give answers. The second is more **pastoral**—it seeks to give comfort.

Unbelievably, after his wife and three close friends have accused him, a fourth colleague, Elihu, launched his attack (JOB 32–37). Like the others, Elihu saw in Job's suffering evidence that he had displeased God. In fact, Elihu's arguments reached new heights (or sank to new lows). Job 32:2 describes his deep wrath. Elihu's angry accusations drive home the seeming contradiction between Job's claims of innocence and the suffering that was surely divine judgment.

This argument is tragically familiar. It is a point of view that can surface when people suffer. This is where the accusations of Job's "comforters" were rooted. It is often called the Doctrine of Retribution: that God only rewards the righteous and always judges/punishes the wicked.

This presupposition, echoed in Psalms 34 and 37, is justification for the relentless battle the three friends waged against Job. Countering these attacks was a losing battle, fought on unfamiliar ground with inadequate

resources. It was a war Job couldn't win, evidenced by his response to Elihu's accusations . . . silence.

Job's war began with a relentless assault from family and friends, but there was a second front as well.

## **Where Is God?**

Throughout the verbal melee with his friends, Job defended his integrity and proclaimed his innocence. But his defense also contained an offense as he made accusations of his own. However, Job's target was not his wife and friends. Job took aim at God Himself, lashing out with his own questions, doubts, concerns, and even accusations. His rebuttals are laced with anger and derision.

Job's transparency is part of what makes his story so accessible and relevant. We feel his grief and pain; we begin to understand the depths of his anguish and his confusion and why he feels that way. As a result, Job's laments resonate with our own perplexed cries.

Job's wrestlings carried with them at least three implied questions—questions likely on the tip of our tongue when we suffer.

## **A Question of Fear to the God of Comfort**

*"I am afraid of all my sufferings; I know that You will not hold me innocent" (JOB 9:28).*

We wrestle with our sufferings and the God who seems to be permitting them and find our hearts stricken with a paralyzing fear. Sometimes, instead of finding comfort in our relationship with God, we question that relationship.

Suddenly we have no firm footing from which to climb out of the abyss of our pain, and we wonder why the God of comfort would allow us to be so tormented.

## **A Question of Injustice to the God of Justice**

*“If I cry out concerning wrong, I am not heard. If I cry aloud, there is no justice” (JOB 19:7).*

The more mysterious our suffering and the more it seems without cause, the more unjust it seems. Something is terribly wrong in the universe, and we don't know what to do. This is an understandable reaction to suffering, and it is amplified when we see the weak, the innocent, and the young suffer. Like Job, we wonder how we can believe in the possibility of justice when life seems irreversibly unjust.

## **A Question of Weakness to the God of Strength**

*“For God made my heart weak, and the Almighty terrifies me” (JOB 23:16).*

When suffering is overwhelming, it reminds us how



*Something is terribly wrong in the universe, and we don't know what to do. This is . . . amplified when we see the weak, the innocent, and the young suffer.*

small we are and how big the world is. In such moments, we desperately need the strength of the Lord, but at the same time it seems that the Lord Himself is allowing the very things that are draining the life from us. Job's words of terror can echo in our hearts as we are confronted with our weakness in the moments when strength is needed most.

Job's questions sound like accusations,<sup>▶</sup> framing his disappointments, suspicions, and doubts; and his questions (like ours) go unaddressed—until he comes into the presence of the living God.

▶ *The people in Bible times generally believed that **suffering and disease** were directly connected to **personal sin**. In the gospels, Jesus' disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2)*

Job wanted to confront God; he requested an audience; he wanted his questions answered. And God showed up (JOB 38:1)! When God spoke to the accusing, indignant, frustrated, and still suffering Job out of a whirlwind, He challenged Job with questions of His own:

*"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements? Surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? To what were its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (JOB 38:4-7).<sup>▶</sup>*

Job was brought face-to-face with the Creator whose

🔔 *In Hebrew, verse 4 literally reads, “Where were you (Job) when I (God) established the earth?”*

mind is unsearchable and whose wisdom and purposes are reflected in the majesty of His creation. What right did Job have to question the wisdom of the Creator? Will he accuse the Author of life? Will he proclaim his own worthiness in the presence of the holy God?

Job's experience mirrors that of the song-leader Asaph, who had no answers to his struggles until he entered the sanctuary and the presence of God (PSALM 73:17). In God's presence, Job discovered that even without answers, without relief from his suffering, he had all he needed because God had given Job Himself:

*Then Job answered the LORD and said, “I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted. ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.” ‘Hear, now, and I will speak; I will ask You, and You instruct me.’ “I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You; therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes” (JOB 42:1-6 NASB).*

Without explaining the mystery or reconciling the pain, God reminded Job that His power and wisdom were infinitely beyond Job's.

The solution to suffering and the doubts it raises is not

found in argument. It is found in learning to rest in God's grace and to trust in His power—even when the suffering is mysterious and overwhelming.





*four*

## **A Wisdom Gained Through Pain**

**S**easons of suffering are difficult, but they should not be wasted. Suffering can instruct and inform us. As Benjamin Disraeli said, "Seeing much, suffering much, and studying much are the three pillars of learning."

Suffering is not a welcome teacher. But what did Job learn on his journey into the darkness of loss, grief, and pain?

### **Suffering Is Inevitable**

*"For affliction does not come from the dust, nor does trouble spring from the ground; yet man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward" (JOB 5:6-7).*

Carl Sandburg wrote what he claimed was the shortest poem in English literature: "Born. Troubled. Died."

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "He has seen but half the universe who has never been shown the house of Pain. As the salt sea covers more than two-thirds of the surface of the globe, so sorrow encroaches on man in felicity."

Regardless of Eliphaz the Temanite's motivation for speaking the words of Job 5:6-7—whether intended to comfort or accuse—they are nonetheless true. Suffering is an inevitable part of living in a world distorted by sin, "As the sparks fly upward." In a broken world, suffering is the norm, not the exception. The presence of suffering, not its absence, defines normalcy.

## God Is Alive

*"For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth" (JOB 19:25).* 

 *The Hebrew word translated "Redeemer" here is **gaal**. In the Old Testament historical books **gaal** is used to refer to someone who will buy back property that is in hock or purchase a friend or relative who had been sold into slavery.*

How do we respond to our inevitable suffering and loss? With fatalism? Realism? Doubt? Despair? Faith? A combination? Our hearts and minds are often torn between these options. Sometimes we despair in fatalism; sometimes we affirm our faith in the midst of screaming doubts. Rather than doubting the existence of God, Job's suffering drove him to confirm it.

Holding on to our confidence in the reality and power of God, especially when circumstances defy our understanding, can lift our experiences of hardship to something more. Something higher. Something of worth because He is there.

## God Is Aware

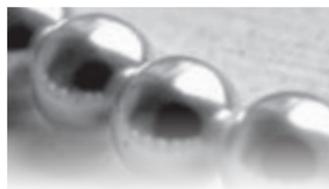
*“But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold” (JOB 23:10).*

Not only is God alive but He is fully aware of the challenges we face. In Christ, God is “touched with the feeling of our infirmities” (HEBREWS 4:15 ERV). He knows the purposes our pain can accomplish. Job learned that God is aware of the path of our suffering; it is not so random after all. Dark seasons of life may be tools in His hand to mold us and shape us into what He desires.

God wastes nothing, including the seasons of suffering that teach us so much about life, about ourselves, and about our heavenly Father. 🐾

### 🐾 **What to say to the sufferer:**

*“I don’t know...” “I am so sorry...” “I don’t understand it either...”  
“I love you...” “God still cares.”*

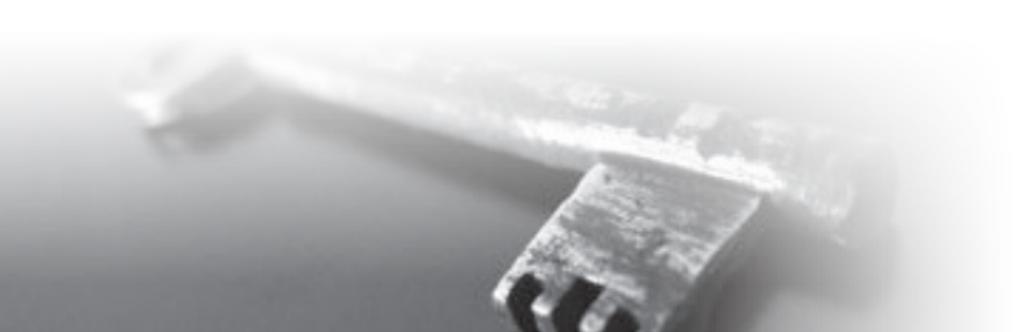


*In a broken world,  
suffering is the  
norm, not the  
exception.*

## God Is Trustworthy

*He said, “. . . The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD” (JOB 1:21).*

In the end, Job's first response was his best response. Uttered in faith, it was proven accurate. The trustworthiness of God is one of the lessons learned best in the crucible of suffering. The inscrutable wisdom and trustworthiness of God is a sure anchor in the most turbulent storms of life.



*five*

## Life Lessons

**A**ncient Greek poet **Aeschylus** rooted his philosophy of learning in the hard ground of suffering. He wrote the words that Robert Kennedy quoted to an Indiana crowd on April 4, 1968, as he announced the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

*Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget  
falls drop by drop upon the heart  
until, in our own despair, against our will,  
comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.*

"Wisdom through the awful grace of God." Wisdom at great cost. In other settings, the wisdom Job gained might sound like truisms or even clichés, but when we suffer, they become the lifelines to which we learn to cling.

Elie Wiesel was among the prisoners at the Auschwitz concentration camp forced to watch the execution of a young boy. As the boy died, a choking voice behind him sobbed, "Where is God? Where is God?" Wiesel's 15-year-old heart could find only one answer, "God is there, hanging on those gallows."

There is something true in Wiesel's observation. In the final analysis, the cross is God's answer to the problem of suffering. On the cross, God entered into suffering with us and forever redeemed it. Peter Kreeft rightly said, "Jesus is the tears of God."

Henri Nouwen concluded that God liberates, not by removing suffering from us but by sharing it with us. Jesus is "God-who-suffers-with-us," most clearly seen in the cross of Christ. Perhaps that is why George MacLeod wrote:

*Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage heap; at a crossroad so cosmopolitan they had to write his title in Hebrew and in Greek and in Latin; at the kind of place where cynics talk smut and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died. And that is what he died about.*

The reality of the suffering Savior as "the God-who-suffers-with-us" prompted John Stott to say, "I could never



*On the cross, God entered into suffering with us and forever redeemed it.*

myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the one Nietzsche<sup>1</sup> ridiculed as 'God on the cross.' In a real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?"

↪ *Once a brilliant philosopher, **Fredrick Nietzsche**, an atheist, spent the last few years of his life in a mental hospital. A world with no redemption, no grace, and no mercy is too overwhelming and horrifying to live in.*

God loves us with an everlasting love. Followers of Christ can embrace this with hope and confidence and can offer it to a world suffering more than we can imagine. We do not offer creeds or ideologies, theories or theologies. In the end, we offer Jesus, "God-who-suffers-with-us."

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■ Want to read more about Job, suffering, and the love of God? Here are some further resources from Our Daily Bread Ministries ([ourdailybread.org](http://ourdailybread.org)) and Discovery House ([dhp.org](http://dhp.org)):

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*Let God Be God: Life-Changing Truths from the Book of Job* by Ray Stedman, Discovery House

*Broken Things: Why We Suffer* by M.R. DeHaan, MD, Discovery House

*If God Is God Why Do Bad Things Happen? Os Guinness on the Problem of Evil* (Video)  
Day of Discovery: [dod.org/dod2254.html](http://dod.org/dod2254.html)

*Our Ultimate Refuge: Job and the Problem of Suffering* by Oswald Chambers, Discovery House



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