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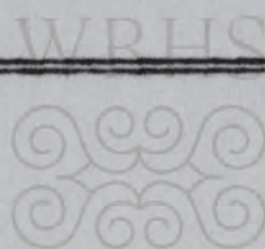
If God is just why do the innocent suffer?, 1926.

"IF GOD IS JUST WHY DO THE INNOCENT SUFFER?"

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING.

MARCH 14, 1926, CLEVELAND, O.



We generally extol God in words and praise Him as righteous and benevolent when we prosper and are happy and when the grief we have to bear is moderate, but it is otherwise when such troubles as are described in Job come over us. Some of us deny God and believe that there is no ruler in the universe, even if their property alone is lost; others retain their faith in the existence of justice, even when suffering from loss of property, whereas loss of children is too much affliction for them. Others are made firm in their faith even with the loss of their children. But there is no one who can patiently bear pain that reaches his own person; he then murmurs and complains of injustice and authority in his heart or with his tongue.

Thus wrote the greatest of Jewish philosophers, Moses Maimonides, in his chapter on "Evil" in his monumental work "The Guide For the Perplexed". How profoundly true these words are each one of us can attest by evidence borrowed from Job's experience. All of us are quite ready to accept the good things of God, even when we do not deserve them, but we resent when evil is visited upon us, even when we are deserving of that evil, and certainly when we feel that we are not deserving our resentment knows no bounds. We attribute cruelty and injustice to God or we deny his existence entirely.

I recall a woman who was a faithful Temple

worshipper, seemingly a religious person. She lost her son and at once she seemed to feel that her faith had betrayed her. She seemed to see in her bereavement truth either of God's injustice, of his cruelty, or his impotence or his non-existence. She has never since attended a place of worship. I have known many men and women who went through the valley of the shadow of death, who were sorely tried, and to whose lips there leaped the bitter words of complaint concerning God's mismanagement of his universe, his injustice or his unreality.

One of course sympathizes with them in their sorrows; one cannot help but sympathize with them in their dread tribulations, but in all honesty one is compelled to say that their idea of religion is very primitive and their conception of faith is very naive. They still think-- unconsciously, of course, of religion exactly as the primitive man thought of it: as a sort of barter with his deity. The primitive worshipper may covenant with his god and contract with him. "If you will be good unto me and protect me, if you will give me victory over mine enemies, if you will prosper my life and increase my flock, why, then I will build an altar to thee and I will bring sacrifices unto thee and I will worship thee. If you fail to do that, if you permit misfortune to be visited upon me; if I am vanquished by mine enemy, if sickness comes to me or death to my dear ones, then I shall not build you an altar, but I shall take my sacrifices and my devotions elsewhere."

Unfortunately, this contractual idea of religion is still held by thousands of people, and I am compelled to say in all honesty that such people are not religious. They are really trades people; they traffic in religion; they regard religion as a sort of a life and health insurance policy, which religion is not. Basically, there is one great error, one great misconception underlying the old-fashioned morality, and I want to point it out to you, because I am afraid that it is still to be found in the minds of many of you. This error, this misconception, is that God in his providence must reward or punish the good or the wicked in a physical way; that God's retribution is like our retribution--physical.

In other words, if I am charitable and righteous and honest, then God should reward me with health, with wealth, with long life, with physical things. If I am wicked and unrighteous and evil in my doings, then God should at once punish me with pain, with poverty and with an early death. Thus we would like to prescribe for God the manner of governing his world based upon our code of justice, a code which is based on our limited and finite knowledge and experiences, a code which is wrung out of the emergencies and the immediateness of our imperfect social organization. Our code, our way of judging, we would like to make God's way of judging. But God's way is not our way. God's way is not, what I choose to call in all reverence, this cash-and-carry way of justice; this turning in a good

deed and expecting in return physical comforts or physically desirable conditions in reward for the good deed. That is not God's way.

I know many people, I know many noble men and women who have lived lives of probity and integrity, whose days were full of sadness and suffering; and I know many ignoble men and women, many worthless men and women who have lived in the lap of luxury, wanting nothing, deprived of nothing, and who lived to a good old age. Suffering is not punishment for sin, nor is prosperity reward of virtue. Many people are prosperous who have not merited such prosperity, and many people suffer who are not deserving of any suffering. Physical misfortune or physical prosperity have nothing to do in the main with moral quality and moral worth; they may overtake any man or woman at any time, at all times.

God rewards us for our good deeds and punishes us for our evil deeds--deeds which in their essence are not physical facts but spiritual facts. God rewards us and punishes us spiritually--in our spiritual life, in our inner life, in our real life. It is within us, not in our flesh or in our appetites, but in us, in our essential self, in our personality, in that thing which is really ourselves, that we must look for the consequences of good and evil, for the reward of good and evil. He who has lived a life of worth, of nobility, of wisdom, of courage, of moral enterprise, will find his life, his real life, his inner life, filled with meaning, with beauty, with interest; you will find therein

a sense of satisfaction, of gratification, of contentment and peace of soul for having lived the right life and played the game worthily and well.

That is the supreme reward which no amount of physical want or deprivation or suffering can lessen by an iota. He who has lived a life of waste; he who has squandered his spiritual resources; a life of intemperance, of cruelty, of wrong, will find within himself his punishment, a starved and stunted life, an empty life, a drab life, an ugly life, a troubled conscience, a miserable self-depreciation, a cheapening of himself, a devastation and a desolation. And no amount of physical well-being can lessen the horror of that punishment.

And so it is within our personality--and this is the thought which I would like to underscore for you this morning--it is within our personality, our own self, that the moral laws of God operate with certainty and with swiftness all the time, and in that world the innocent never suffer and the wicked never prosper. Let me elaborate on that thought one more moment. We must not confuse the two worlds. We should not confuse our physical world, the world of our bodies and of our senses, the mortal clay world, the world that is subject to accident and to disease and to pain and to suffering and to death and to decay,--we ought not to confuse that world with our spiritual world. Physical man is bound by the same iron laws of nature, which are God's laws, as the beast of the fields or the flowers. Physically,

we are subject to the same laws of growth and decay, of chance and of change and of accident. All animate things are subject to disease, to pain, to old age, to death, to corruption. There is no escape from it. And it is quite hopeless to ask why; it is quite hopeless and almost meaningless to ask: "Why did God create His world as He created it? Why in this way, and why not in that way? Why did God create man mortal? Why could He not have created him of less perishable stuff and of fewer deficiencies? Why couldn't He have given man an eternal life, a life free from disease? Why couldn't He have made him perfect?"

It is quite hopeless, quite meaningless to ask that question; just as it is quite hopeless to ask: What is the purpose of all creation? Why this universe? Where is it all tending? These numerous solar systems swinging at maddening speed in space, where are they all tending? What is it all about? Why? Why, we don't know; we cannot know. Only the Creator knows the purpose of His creation. A created thing cannot understand the motive, the plan, the purpose which was in the mind of the creator. We do not know; we cannot know; we shall not know. For man did not create the universe, but is only an insignificant, infinitesimal iota, a grain of sand within this cosmic scheme.

The foolish man will fret against the limitations of his mortal life. The foolish man will complain: "Why was I created with these limitations of a mortal man? Why with a body that is subject to pain?" The wise man will

reconcile himself to his destiny as a mortal man; the wise man will learn to expect suffering and want and pain and death in the world; and the wise man will use his God-given intellect to protect himself as far as possible; he will use that intelligence which God gave him to lessen his pain as far as possible, to make his passage through the world as free of misery and suffering as possible; he will try to develop the science of medicine which will lessen pain and stamp out epidemic and prolong and safeguard his life; he will try to make accident less fatal by precautions which he will be able to take as a result of learning more and more about the operations of the physical laws of nature. In other words, he will protect himself as far as possible within the iron ring which nature and nature's God have prescribed for him, and in this constant effort to protect himself his mind will develop, his intellect will ripen, his personality will develop, interests will come into his existence, his life will be fuller and richer as a result of these constant and assiduous efforts to overcome evil more and more all the time. And these evils in themselves will prove a goad and a stimulus to him to advance to new discoveries, new inventions, to safeguard his life, to protect him.

But he will always remember, the wise man will, that when all is said and done he is human and not divine; that he is fashioned out of the dust and must return unto the dust, and his goodness and his virtue, even as his

wickedness and his vices, have little to do with the operations of these inexorable, relentless laws of the physical world, and he will do well not to forget and needlessly to complain. But it is in his inner world that man must find his freedom, his consolation, his immortality; it is in that world of his which he himself fashioned, of which he himself is truly master, that he is free, that he can exercise choice, free will; and it is in that world, that vital personality of his, where he will find the precipitates of good and evil conduct, quite irrespective of what happens to his physical self. It is there that goodness will yield goodness and evil will yield evil as sure as fate; it is there that the righteous man will be rewarded by a sense of pride and by a sense of self-dignity, by satisfaction, by peace; and it is there that the wicked man will be punished by the terrible conscience and an ugly sense of self, and by all the evils which attend sin.

That, I take it, friends, is a more helpful way of looking at this problem of evil,--at least, this is the way I have reasoned this problem out for myself, and I have found in it great strength. This is the way, too, that Job reasoned this problem out for himself. That rare and wonderful Book of Job, the crowning literary achievement of the ancient literature of Israel, is built around this problem: Why do the innocent suffer? It is cast in the form of a drama, and the wrestling and the perturbations of the human soul are made vocal upon the lips of Job and his

friends. Job was a righteous man and a God-fearing man; he was rich, he was honored, he was respected among his fellow-men. He worshipped God in faithfulness and in sincerity; and suddenly, without any warning, misfortune begins to fall upon him. First his property is carried off in a rain and he is left a pauper; then his children are killed as they are assembled in the home of one of the brothers when the house collapses, and Job is now deprived of his children; and then to cap the climax of his misery, a foul and loathsome disease is visited upon him, the disease of leprosy. And Job, the proud emir of Arabia, finds himself an outcast, an object of loathing and horror sitting on an ash heap outside of the walls of his city, using a potsherd with which to scrape his burning skin in order to allay his terrible suffering.

And then this question rushes to his lips, bursts out of the agony of his life, this challenging, demanding, accusing question: Why? Why? Why did God make me this loathsome thing that I am? What have I done to merit it? Where is the justice in the world? Why? And how many people in less terrible circumstances than Job who ask this question? And the three friends of Job come to visit him, and when they see the terrible plight which he is in they at once conclude that Job must have sinned grievously against God to have merited such terrible punishment; and that implied and naive accusation maddens Job into fury. No, he will not acknowledge that! He did not sin and God's

justice cannot be vindicated by humiliating the man Job. Just because the man is mortal and weak and beaten he will not permit himself to be accused of sinfulness in order to justify God's way in the world. And he cries out in that marvelous passage: "As God liveth, who hath robbed me of my right; and the Almighty who hath grieved my soul. As long as my spirit is within me, and the truth of God in my nostrils, my lips shall not speak untruth nor my tongue utter falsity. God forbid that I should justify you; till I die I will not part with my integrity. My righteousness I hold fast and will not let it go; my heart shall not blame any of me so long as I live."

There is something inviolate in a man's soul which cannot be stepped upon, desecrated, even to justify divinity. The friends of Job accused him of arrogance, of irreverence, of blasphemy. But Job remains unmoved, and so his friends, being unable to help him find his way out of the darkness which has fallen over his life, Job must grope for himself; Job must wrestle with this terrible problem himself in order that he may not be driven to complete mental and physical prostration and collapse. And he does grope and he does search and he does rise rung upon rung until he reaches a height which illumines his darkness; and this is how Job reached peace and truth: it soon dawned upon him that the old-fashioned morality which his friends were advocating was not true; that pain is not punishment for sin; that disease and accidents may overtake the good

and the wicked alike; that the physical laws of the universe operate regardless of man's moral or immoral acts.

That is the first great truth which dawns upon the clouded mind of Job, and in that truth he finds great consolation, for it means that God has not cast him off, that he has not done wrong, that a moral law has not been violated, that he is just suffering the doom of all created things. Why is there evil in the world? Why is the world not perfect? Job too soon realizes that mortal man cannot answer that question. He believes that He who fashioned the universe, and holds it all, as it were, in the hollow of his hand, He alone who encompasses eternity, who knows the ultimate relationships of things, He alone knows the why and the wherefore. Man cannot know.

And then the second great truth is revealed to him out of his suffering. Does that then mean that good is vain and valueless? Does that therefore mean that moral efforts have no meaning and no tangible consequences in the universe? "No!" cries Job. They have tremendous, tangible, potent consequences in the world and in the life of man. But those consequences are not to be sought for in physical things, in the things we touch with the flesh,--in comforts, in ease, in prosperity, in physical well-being. No! But they are to be sought for within, in the real sanctuary of human life, in the stronghold and in the citadel of human life; in man's own personality. It is there where goodness is rewarded by goodness; it is there where goodness

gives to man a sense of well-being, of peace, of contentment, of enrichment, of exaltation.

Job knows that in spite of his suffering; he is still the proud man, knowing that he has played the game, that he has followed the hard road because it was the true road to follow, that he has played the game of life worthily, honestly, sportsmanlike. Job is confronted with the thought that if God is the source of morality, then he, by living a Godly life, has approached immeasurably nearer to God; that he has become a fellowman; that he has established a kinship with divinity, which kinship is denied to all those who follow the ways of wrong-doing. They will never know the glory of the nearness of God; they will never know the exaltation which comes to a man when he does the right and the true and the noble thing; they are estranged from God, while Job, in spite of his misery and suffering, is near to God. And that is the supreme reward of the moral life, and that reward no amount of physical mishaps or circumstances can halt.

That is the second great revelation that comes to Job; and the third revelation which comes to Job is this: his very suffering, far from being a sign of God's disapproval, of his estrangement from divinity, has enabled him to see more clearly the truth and the reality of life. Through his blinding tears he was able to catch a vision of man's heroic destiny; and man's heroic destiny is this: faithfulness,--in spite of ten thousand hells of suffering, faithful-

ness and steadfastness to ideals, in spite of all the horrors and the torments and the tortures of the physical world; fortitude, courage and advancing spirit in spite of all the bloody obstacles which the physical world about us puts in our way. That is the heroic destiny of man--his unconquerable, indefeasible, irrefutable spirit, ceaselessly aspiring and ceaselessly advancing, even while the body is being racked and tormented by pain and suffering. That is the divine career of man's life.

When those truths dawn upon Job he prostrates himself before God and says: "God, I am comforted in spite of my lot." He has found strength to endure his endless torture; he has found a solace and a consolation in the integrity of his inner life, in the spirit of righteousness which was his.

And I believe, friends, that is perhaps the real way of looking at this problem: if God is just why do the innocent suffer? We must disassociate in our mind the two worlds--the physical world and the spiritual world. In the physical world certain natural laws operate to which we are subject and to which we must adjust ourselves, and in this adjustment of man to the physical world lie all the signs and evidences of his progress and civilization. The more civilized he is the more he will know how to control these forces, how to use them for his advancement. In other words, the very evil in the physical world are the goads which move him along the road of civilization.

In the spiritual world man is free, man is master of his destiny. I say man either singly or men collectively. And it is there where goodness is rewarded by goodness and where evil is punished by evil; it is there where the innocent never suffer and the wicked never prosper. God is just in all his ways. There are many mysteries which we cannot solve; there are many dark veils which we cannot penetrate. We trust in Him who lived before all things were and will live when all things will cease to be. We trust that He who could fashion this universe can also administer it justly and lovingly.

Nor we cannot know the why, we humbly submit, but this we do know: that He has so organized our life, our real, inner life, that there every good act yields an abundance of blessing, and every evil act brings untold misery. And knowing that we are comforted and strengthened.

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