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## The Book of Job and Our Human Suffering

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## The Book of Job and Our Human Suffering

### Abstract

"In this world, people suffer. It comes with the territory. You can wish that fact not true, but you cannot wish it away. People suffer."

Posting about the universal experience of grief and pain from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-book-of-job-and-our-human-suffering/>

### Keywords

In All Things, Job, suffering, children, death, cemeteries

### Disciplines

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### Comments

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# in things

June 21, 2018

## The Book of Job and Our Human Suffering

**James Calvin Schaap**

On a hill north of Flandreau, the sign in front of a well-kept church claims that it is “The Oldest Continuously Used Church in South Dakota” (all caps because it is, for sure, a title worth coveting). That means it has been “First Presbyterian” for 140 years, and “River Bend Church” when it was established along the Big Sioux River long, long ago. The name change came later.

But a church is neither more nor less than the people of its family, including the old ones out back in the cemetery, where that congregation’s long history comes alive in the outlines etched on the oldest of the gravestones. You can read some of that story for yourself if you walk through their cemetery sometime.

Lying tipped over in the grass, one gravestone is weathered but still readable in spots—some of its old lines anyway. If you look closely, you will see that it is the grave of a child, a boy—I think—even though the name is not easy to read. His last name was Weston, and he died long ago in 1894. Although worn, the dates are clear enough to know that he was only three years old when he passed away.

Beneath the Weston boy’s dates, the inscription carved into the stone is a line from the gospel one might expect on almost any child’s grave: “Jesus said, ‘Suffer little children to come unto me, . . . for of such is the kingdom of heaven. . .’” (Luke 18:16). You can still read most of that, more than 120 years later.

Beneath that line from the book of Luke, in letters I could not have read even if they had been crisp and clear, is another wording of the same verse. This line, a bit larger of font, is written in the Dakota language.

Not long ago, I stood in that cemetery on a dewy, Saturday morning and told myself that some stories are readable in every language. Because even though that child—a Santee three-year-

old from some home along the Big Sioux River—had been dead for more than 100 years, I could imagine his story. Looks to me as if his grieving parents were believers, maybe bilingual, and still Santee enough to want to read the comfort of Jesus' words in the warmth of their first language—the blessed language of intimacy.

After some time, when the death of a child can be spoken of, that story of grief is one that can be told in any language. A beloved child who is no longer among us becomes a pained absence realized in every community around the world.

I stood there in the wet grass of that country churchyard as if no time had passed; stood there that morning as if gathered around me were all the saints of Riverview Presbyterian, a whole crowd of witnesses of every race and creed.

There's not much more to say than what's inscribed there in the weathered stone and lichen. That grave is lying in the grass of the cemetery of an old church up on a slow hill outside a small town in eastern South Dakota, marking the grave site of a little boy who died when he was three years old, a story on a stone tipped over by age and relentless Great Plains seasons.

You don't have to be a member of River Bend Church to know suffering. In a way, we've all been in that cemetery.

Comparing levels of suffering is a useless exercise, even shameful. To say Job's immense losses—all his children, all his possessions, even his health—were somehow worse in total than the suffering of the Westons is as heartless as it is dehumanizing. In this world, people suffer. It comes with the territory. You can wish that fact not true, but you cannot wish it away. People suffer.

And the question so many of us have asked, again and again, is why on earth do we have to suffer here in the kingdom of a *loving* God? Why do bad things happen to good people? Somewhere in the grass around the Weston boy's grave there may well remain a bit of DNA his mother and father left behind as they stood beside that stone and wept, more than once, I'm sure. "Suffer the little children to come unto me, . . .for of such is the kingdom of heaven" can sound completely different here than it might as the text of a children's sermon.

Then, *why*? That's the question that Job, this strange biblical fable tries so hard to answer.

Does it? Not really.

After thirty-some chapters, God almighty finally gives an answer to Job's unimaginable suffering with an almighty rant: "Wilt thou also disannul my judgment? Wilt thou condemn me, that thou mayest be righteous? Hast thou an arm like God? Or canst thou thunder with a voice like him? (40:8-9 KJV)

God's answer seems more like a screed than a love poem. It indicts Job's impudent questioning by reminding him to remember to whom he is speaking—the Holy One of Israel, as Isaiah the prophet calls him. "Whatsoever is under heaven is mine," that Jehovah thunders (41:11).

Job, who has suffered so immensely, rather quickly accepts the beating: "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes," (42:5-6).

At which time, the Lord pivots: "So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning: for he had fourteen thousand sheep, and six thousand camels, and a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she asses. He had also seven sons and three daughters," (42:12-14). Just for good measure, the narrator let us know that no young women anywhere were as gorgeous.

A quarter century ago, a Jewish-American rabbi named Chaim Potok visited Dordt's campus. He'd written a best-selling novel titled *The Chosen*, which became a favorite among evangelicals because it took faith seriously. The English Department had dinner with him that night at President Hulst's house, where a lively discussion ensued; and as I remember, Potok happened to talk about Job—both the book and the story.

Potok was no Calvinist. His rabbinical training had taught him to lock horns with holy writ and not to go to his knees—at least not without a fight. I've not forgotten what Potok said that night. "That ending—God giving it all back again," he said, a wry grin on his face, "—you can't help but think whoever wrote that book slapped it on because he wanted to get published."

He was being silly, but only partially, because if the questions Job and his so-called friends ask all through this grieved book of suffering are, in fact, answered forever by what happens at the end of the book, then we wouldn't be talking about it today, would we?

There are no good answers for the immense suffering some of us experience in life. I don't know what Reverend Williamson, the Weston's pastor in Flandreau, might have said to the couple who put their three-year-old into the grave just outside the church; but I'm sure he tried to give them something that would bring peace.

There are, after all, a thousand ways to understand human suffering, none of them, at least in this valley of sin, totally convincing. All we have is faith, itself a gift, to get us through. All we believe is love.