

BOILS AT CHRISTMAS

by Ray C. Stedman

The old Christmas carol tells us to "Deck the halls with boughs of holly ... 'tis the season to be jolly," but I have noted, as I am sure you have, a very strange and somber mood this Christmas. The energy crunch has kept all the decorations from the streets, and not many houses are showing bright lights either. It is a rather dull and gloomy Christmas in comparison with those of the past. Most of us feel the somberness of this occasion, especially as we read in the newspapers the chilling stories of cruel and ruthless murders occurring in many places today. We know that famine is spreading in the Sahara, war clouds hang over the Mideast, and corruption in politics still occupies the front pages of our newspapers.

Many people today are asking, very honestly, "What is there to celebrate about Christmas?" Perhaps many of you are facing personal sorrow in your own lives, feeling pain and tragedy. And despite the joy of family reunions there is an inner pain and darkness.

I had lunch this week with a man who told me he had all the outward marks of success. He was eminent in his profession, had a beautiful home and a lovely family -- all these things that people count as important. And yet inwardly he was filled with a constant agony and a sense of self-doubt.

Many are feeling this way. "Where is the joy of Christmas?" they say.

Well, for an answer to that question I would like to turn to the record of the deepest human agony found in the pages of the Bible -- the book of Job. You know the story of Job. What happens to him is one of the most agonizing records of history. This man lost all the things which humans count as necessary in life. All that men count important or worthwhile this man had, and then lost. It is an amazing story of disaster which strikes the human spirit.

As the book begins, we are given a look behind the scenes, where Satan gained access to Job, and then, on a single day, caused tragedy to strike in this man's life. All the wealth and possessions he had were swept away as disaster after disaster hit him. His herds and flocks were stolen or killed, his houses ruined and demolished, and then, as a crowning blow, all of his children, seven sons and three daughters, were killed in that one day. What a tragic day that must have been!

We read today of families being wiped out in a single airplane or auto accident, and know the heartache and trouble that must bring to loved ones.

But this was not all. As you know, Satan went back to God and asked permission to afflict Job personally, physically. So there came upon Job a terrible siege of boils, loathsome running sores, which persisted week after week after week. Anyone who has ever had a boil or carbuncle knows how terribly painful it is. Here was a man who had them from head to toe. He sat in the ash heap and bemoaned his fate, and felt abandoned by all his friends. Even his wife finally reached the end of her endurance and patience. She turned from supporting him in his agony and reproached him, told him to curse God and die. Job sat alone in the ash heap bemoaning the terrible lot which had befallen him, and saw no reason for it, no explanation of it in his life.

Finally, to make matters worse yet, he had three friends who came to comfort him. They sat there for a week without saying anything, which was wise, but then they began to talk. Their argument was in just one direction -- that suffering such as this can result only from hidden sin, and that Job was covering something up. That unjust accusation simply wiped out his human spirit. Feeling himself so unjustly treated he cries out in his agony to God. He summarizes his difficulties in Chapter 19, beginning with Verse 13:

**"He has put my brethren far from me,
and my acquaintances are wholly estranged from me.**

My kinsfolk and my close friends have failed me [the very ones he looked to for comfort
 -- in fact, a little earlier in this book he calls these three friends "you miserable comforters"];
the guests in my house have forgotten me;
my maidservants count me as a stranger;
I have become an alien in their eyes.
I call to my servant, but he gives me no answer;
I must beseech him with my mouth.
I am repulsive to my wife,
loathsome to the sons of my own mother.
Even young children despise me;
when I rise they talk against me.
All my intimate friends abhor me,
and those whom I loved have turned against me.
My bones cleave to my skin and to my flesh,
and I have escaped [i.e., escaped death] by the skin of my teeth. [That, by the way, is
 the origin of this familiar expression.]
Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends,
for the hand of God has touched me!
Why do you, like God, pursue me?
Why are you not satisfied with my flesh?" {Job 19:13-22 RSV}

So he cries out of his anguished heart for his friends simply to leave him alone, at least to have the grace to leave him alone in his agony and his painful suffering. But to Job the worst thing of all, you realize as you read through this book, is his feeling that he cannot reach God with his cries, and that even if he could, the greatness of God is such that it would overwhelm him and he would not even be able to explain how he feels. This causes him a terrible sense of frustration. So he cries out in Verse 23,

"Oh that my words were written!
Oh that they were inscribed in a book!" {Job 19:23 RSV}

Job did not know that this prayer would be answered. He was merely hoping that his words might be written down so that someone, sometime, might be able to understand what he was going through.

"O that with an iron pen and lead
they were graven in the rock for ever!" {Job 19:24 RSV}

Such was the gloom in which this man lived, as many of us are feeling gloom and despair in this day, although perhaps not to the same extent.

But suddenly a light breaks in through this gloom. In the next few verses there is something which occurs several times in the book of Job. Out of this terrible sense of agony and anguish and frustration and weakness and despair and anger Job feels, suddenly a light of hope and of faith is born. Light breaks into his gloom and darkness, and there is a sudden dawning of faith. This is what we have in the very next verse:

"For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then from my flesh I shall see God,
whom I shall see on my side [or, "for myself"],
and my eyes shall behold, and not another." {Job 19:25-27a RSV}

Then the light fades, he sinks back into the gloom, and he begins to cry out again,

"My heart faints within me!" {Job 19:27b RSV}

But for the moment there has been a brilliant breakthrough of light into his darkness, and Job sees two remarkable things: He sees that the ultimate answer of God to the agony of men is to be the coming to earth of a *goel* (that is the Hebrew term Job uses, pronounced "go-el"), a kinsman-Redeemer, a Redeemer who would

be related to him. You find this word frequently in the pages of the Old Testament. It is in the book of Ruth, where Ruth comes out of Moab and begins to glean in the fields of Boaz, and, to her astonishment, she learns that Boaz is her kinsman, related to her through marriage, and that he therefore can act as a kinsman-redeemer, as one who has the capacity, the ability, and the willingness to heal her hurt, change her circumstances, and deliver her from her troubles. This is what Job saw the coming of a *goel*, a kinsman-Redeemer, who would have the strength and the ability and capacity to deliver.

And linked with this was Job's realization that this would work its way out through a death and a resurrection. He says, "After my skin has been destroyed [i.e., after his body has died], then 'out of' [or 'apart from'] my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another." Then the light fades and Job sinks again back into his gloom.

The amazing thing is that in this flash of light, in the midst of the darkness of this man, in his ancient world, there was a revelation of the two great causes for celebration in the Christian faith:

1. Here is the message of Christmas -- an incarnation. There shall come a *goel*, a kinsman-Redeemer to earth.
2. And here is the message of Easter, the resurrection from the dead, when the ultimate solution to man's problems will find expression in the resurrection of the body, and man shall enter into the life God intends for him.

On this occasion, of course, we are interested in this glimpse Job had of the message of Christmas. When Jesus came to earth that first Christmas, he came as the *goel*, the Redeemer of man, but as the Redeemer who is one of us, is related to us. This is the great truth Job saw in that ancient day. We do not know how long ago Job lived. The book tells us that he was a citizen of the land of Uz. No one knows for certain where Uz is, although I suspect it is down in that part of the Persian Gulf where the Arabs are now holding much of the oil of earth. Many scholars feel that this is the oldest book in the Bible, that Job lived long before the days of Moses or even of Abraham. And yet, looking down across the running centuries, he sees that the hope of the solution for man's agony is to be the coming to earth of a kinsman-Redeemer, One who would be related to us.

When Jesus was born in a manger in Bethlehem of Judea, the shepherds were told that he who was born would be a baby, a man, a human being like us, related to us, and thus would be one who would share our anguish, who would share our pain and our sense of frustration, and would understand it. And when he came, he came into a world like our world today. Sherwood Wirt, the editor of *Decision Magazine*, has captured the mood of that first Christmas very exactly in this description which I took from a Christmas card I received from him,

The people of that time were being heavily taxed, and faced every prospect of a sharp increase to cover expanding military expenses. [Does this sound familiar?] The threat of world domination by a cruel, ungodly, power-intoxicated band of men was ever just below the threshold of consciousness. Moral deterioration had corrupted the upper levels of society and was moving rapidly into the broad base of the populace. Intense nationalistic feeling was clashing openly with new and sinister forms of imperialism. Conformity was the spirit of the age. Government handouts were being used with increasing lavishness to keep the population from rising up and throwing out the leaders. [How contemporary!] Interest rates were spiraling upward in the midst of an inflated economy. External religious observances were considered a political asset, and abnormal emphasis was being placed upon sports and athletic competition. Racial tensions were at the breaking point. In such a time, and amid such a people, a child was born to a migrant couple who had just signed up for a fresh round of taxation, and who were soon to become political exiles. And the child who was born was called, among other things, Immanuel -- God with us -- the *Goel*, the Kinsman-Redeemer.

That is the message Job saw, which illuminated and alleviated for a brief moment the agony he was going through. God eventually met this man, and, though he did not answer all his questions, he resolved the conflict within his heart, and the story of Job ends on a happy note.

A man came to one of our pastors the other day and said, very excitedly, "Did you know that Job has a happy ending?" So it does. God met this man.

But what Job was permitted to see, in the gloom and despair of his heart, was the ultimate solution to the problems of human agony, whatever it may be, that One would come who has the capacity to take hold of the problem and do something about it, work it out -- but work it out through a process which would involve a death and a resurrection to follow. This is God's process. This is what Job saw. He could put his troubles into the hands of One who was capable of handling them.

This is what the message of Christmas ultimately is to us.

Last Sunday I was listening to the radio broadcast of the service at the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, and I heard Pastor Earl Palmer describe to his audience Rembrandt's painting called *The Adoration of The Shepherds*, Rembrandt's interpretation of the visit of the shepherds to the babe in Bethlehem. It is a simple scene in a stable, and there in the foreground are the mother and child, with Joseph in the shadows in the background. Peering over into the manger where the babe is lying are the shepherds, with their sheep scattered around them. They could not leave the sheep in the field, they had to bring them along. Arching above the manger the artist has painted a ladder which suggests, in the shadows it casts, the form of a cross. Rembrandt was too great a painter just to put a cross in, with no justification in terms of the picture itself, but the ladder subtly suggests it. And on the beam against which the ladder rests is a rooster, the symbol of betrayal. The artist is suggesting that it is by means of the crushing inner agony of betrayal, and the outer agony of crucifixion, that the One in the manger would become the world's Deliverer and Redeemer.

But the striking thing about the picture is that the light illuminating the whole scene is not coming from outside but from the manger where the babe is lying. There is no halo over the babe, such as medieval painters often employed, but the light which illuminates the faces looking in is streaming from the manger. Their faces are put into sharp relief as they look down, and you can see that the light is coming from the babe himself. That is Rembrandt's very remarkable way of saying that the story of Christmas is the story of light in darkness.

The prophet Isaiah had said that a light would break out upon those who sit in darkness. And, through the centuries since, this has been at the heart of the Christmas message. There is a light in the darkness of men's experience. All hope shines and gleams from the manger. And men begin to see the answer to their problems there, for that babe is God's *Goel*, our *Goel*, our Kinsman-Redeemer, One who shares life with us, with its ache, its agony, its pain, its betrayal, its heartache. All that makes up the suffering of men today he understood, he entered into. The world into which he was born was a gloomy, dark, hopeless world, where men lived in misery, by and large, a condition to which the world of our day is again rapidly declining. But what those who put their trust in him learned the glorious good news which broke out upon that dark 1st century, was that there was One who was capable of taking whatever problem a human being was involved in, and doing something about it!

You see, a kinsman-redeemer undertakes to work out the solution to the problems all on his own. He comes into the picture only when the person who is suffering has reached the end of his own resources. As long as a person in Israel had resources of his own, he was expected to use them to help solve his problems. But when he reached the end, where there was nothing left, then he could count on his relatives. And among them would be the one who would be the kinsman-redeemer, one who would undertake the responsibility of delivering him from that difficulty. And this is what Job cried out in the midst of his pain -- "I know, I know that my Goel is alive, and on the earth at last he shall stand. And when the worms have destroyed my body, when my bones and skin are gone, then out of my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and not another" -- a personal, face-to-face confrontation with the One who was his Kinsman-Redeemer. This is the message of Christmas.

This last week I have heard half a dozen stories of people who were on the verge of suicide, who had given up, did not want to live any longer because of the overwhelming pressures of the world in which we live. Then some Christian had somehow been brought into the picture in each case, and had told them of Jesus. They each had made that personal commitment of faith which had related them to the One who came at Christmas, and the miracle occurred once again, as it has occurred so many times. There came that restoration

of inner strength, the impartation of peace and joy within, and the beginning of the gradual working out, sometimes in strange and unanticipated ways, of the difficulties and the problems which oppressed them, and which had seemed so insoluble at first.

That is the message of Christmas, is it not?

Here we have a Goel who can take our problems and work them out. He will lead through death, the death of our present circumstances, to a resurrection beyond. And all this is ours, if we will have him. All God's blessings, and all the victories he has won, are always made available only through faith. You can go through Christmas without him. You can try to work out these problems yourself, if you like. God will let you do it. But if they bring you into a sense of despair, and you still will not turn them over, yield them to the Kinsman-Redeemer to work out, they will crush you, destroy you, and perhaps your life will be at stake. But if you respond to the offer of God and by faith enter into a personal relationship with this One who lives as our Goel and is able to take on the difficulties of our circumstances, you will find that he, as he has done with millions of others, will lead you out of that difficulty. He will give you peace and joy and a sense of oneness with him, will strengthen the inner man and deliver the outer man in his own way and time, as has happened literally to millions and millions of others.

There may well be many among us here this morning who have been coming to this church for some time, and faith has been awakened in your hearts. You have been coming because you feel there is an answer to the difficulties of your life and the problems you are going through, but you have not yet come to that moment of commitment when you hand it over to the One who alone has the capability of working it out. If you are such a person, I would like to ask you simply to hand over those problems, and your very life, to this living Goel, this Kinsman-Redeemer who is able to undertake for you. And out of the gloom and darkness and despair of your life, hope will be born afresh and anew.

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