



The Book of Job and the Problem of Suffering on the Streets of Deadwood

By Karl Jacobson, PhD

HBO's *Deadwood* (2004-2007) is a gritty, harsh, abrasive, and often troubling picture of life in the Old West. In all its gritty harshness the series wrestles with questions that are common to human beings in any time: What is a person's place and purpose in life? How do we make sense of evil? How do we define it, resist it, qualify it, or answer it? What do we think (and believe) about suffering? Where is God in all of this?

Much of *Deadwood* is not suitable for all viewers. It is not only gritty and harsh, but often vulgar and sometimes offensive. In a sense, then, *Deadwood* is much like the Bible (minus the swearing). To be clear, I am not suggesting that a television series and the Bible are equivalent. What I am saying is that the two frequently deal with the same subject matter and questions, often in surprisingly similar ways. Like *Deadwood*, the Bible deals with serious questions and difficult realities, often in unexpectedly coarse ways. As such the Bible and *Deadwood* can, with care, be employed together to provide a compelling entry into, reflection on, and conversation around some of the great human questions in the Bible.

The Bible is quoted frequently in the first season of *Deadwood*. Quotations from 1 Corinthians 12, Psalm 24, Proverbs 16, and Romans 2, 7, and 8 serve as grist for reflection on vocation, purpose, and meaning in life. The book of Job is not quoted in the series, either directly or indirectly, and this may beg the question as to why a comparison with that particular biblical book is suggested here. The key is in the central question of the book of Job, a question that the drama of *Deadwood* echoes—the question of suffering and the role that God plays in it.

The problem of suffering is dealt with, on the streets of *Deadwood*, primarily in the interaction of two of the supporting characters, the Rev. H. W. Smith (Ray McKinnon) and Doc. Cochran (Brad Dourif). Cochran is the settlement's resident doctor, a former army doctor who has fled West following the Civil War; he wrestles with the guilt associated with the deaths of so many of his patients that he was unable to prevent. Smith is an itinerant preacher who comes to the camp to bring the Word of God, working odd jobs to support himself so that he may perform the duties of a minister—preaching, care for the sick and dying, and burials. Over the course of the season it becomes clear that Smith is suffering from an ailment that causes seizures and begins to affect not only his daily living, but his faith as well. Both Smith's vocation and his affliction become the focal point for reflection on the complex intersection of faith and suffering.

Unlike the book of Job *Deadwood* does not set up its reflection in terms of a wager between God and The Satan (for a such a set up in contemporary film see *Constantine*). However, *Deadwood* does engage the question of God's role in human suffering and the

varied struggles with and reactions that human beings may have in response to this difficult question.

What follows is the dialogue (and in one case monologue) from three scenes from *Deadwood* that chart a growing struggle with the problem of Rev. Smith's illness. Before each scene is a brief introductory set-up, and following each scene is suggested reading from Job and questions for reflection and conversation.

Scene One (Season 1, Episode 6)

Following an outbreak of smallpox in Deadwood Rev. Smith is helping Doc Cochran care for the sick and the dying. As they visit with the sick Rev. Smith is struck briefly by a seizure; in the aftermath Smith and Cochran discuss his affliction.

Rev. Smith: "He [God] marks us sinful and forgiven by confession. He has told us and shown us. He has told me."

Doc: "Alright, you listen to me now Reverend. You are goddamn exhausted, and you give yourself no respite. And these seizures may owe something to that. But it also wouldn't surprise me if you had a lesion in your goddamn head, and that's what's giving you the seizures and generating your chats with the goddamn Divinity. Goddamn offense intended."

Rev. Smith: "None taken sir. ... Could not the lesion be the instrument of God's instructive intention doctor? If I am so afflicted?"

Doc: "Well of course it could, his ways not being ours and so forth. But could he not, Reverend, just want you getting out of here and getting yourself some goddamn rest?"

Read Job 1-4

Reflection Questions:

- What are the different reactions to Job's situation by Job, his wife and his friends? Compare and contrast the reactions to Rev. Smith's situation; by Smith himself, and by Cochran.
- What are the basic assumptions about suffering, life, God, and faith that are shared here?

Scene Two

As Rev. Smith's illness grows worse the Doctor stops in to check on him, and the tension between the ways in which these two men react to the illness grows.

Rev. Smith: "Doctor."

Doc: "I wanna have a look at you."

Rev. Smith: "Alright."

Doc: "Don't turn your head away Reverend. Being sick ain't nothing to be ashamed of."

Rev. Smith: "I apologize for the smell."

Doc: "What is it that you smell?"

Rev. Smith: "As if I am dying."

Doc: "You admit no such odor."

Rev. Smith: "I smell my flesh rotting."

Doc: "It isn't rotting Reverend. Your flesh does not smell. You have not died. You're having organic changes in your mind, that's making you believe these things. Do you understand me?"

Rev. Smith: "Formerly Doctor, when the Word took me as I read Scripture, people felt God's presence through me and...that was a great gift that I could give to them. Now the Word does not take me when I read. Nor do I feel Christ's love. Nor do those who listen feel it through me."

Doc: "Alright."

Rev. Smith: "This is God's purpose. The not knowing the purpose, is my portion of suffering."

Doc: "And, is there any pain, competing with the not knowing?"

Rev. Smith: "I am not in pain. There are new smells I smell, and there are parts of my body I can't feel, and...and His love...."

Doc: "And you want to continue like this?"

Rev. Smith: "As long as He wills, this must be my part. To be afraid as well."

Doc: "Well if this is His will, Reverend, He is a son-of-a-bitch."

Read Job 17-20; 32-37

Reflection Questions:

- There are several different "schools of thought" contending in these chapters from Job and in this scene from Deadwood. If you were to arrange the different reactions to the problem of God and suffering along a line (or spectrum) what would it look like? For instance, how would you summarize Doc's explanation of Rev. Smith's suffering? How would you summarize Rev. Smith's explanation of his own suffering? How do these positions relate to the characters you find in Job? Do you see similar positions in Job 17-20; 32-37?
- Whose position in the book of Job is closest to Doc's position? Whose position in the book of Job is closest to the position of Rev. Smith?

- Is there an argument in the Job poems that you do not see in this Deadwood scene? Is there an argument in the Deadwood scene that you do not see in Job?

Scene Three

The final scene is Doc Cochran's prayer for Reverend Smith. Whether or not Cochran is a believer in God may be up for debate, but that he addresses himself to God on behalf of Rev. Smith is clear. He prays for his suffering to end, and for God's purpose, however hard to understand, to be fulfilled.

Doc: "Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, please God, take that minister, what conceivable godly use is his protracted suffering to you, what conceivable godly use... What conceivable godly use was the screaming of all those men, did you need to hear their death agonies to know your, your, your, omnipotence?"

'Momma!'

'Mother, faaaah-marm!'

'Mommy...mommy...mommy! They...they shot my leg off! It hurts so bad...hurts so bad....'

Maybe my understanding's imperfection...trusting that you have a purpose, praying that you consider it served, I beg you to relent. Thy will be done. Amen."

A clip of this scene is available on YouTube:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oMAI2fCYgCQ>

Read Job 38-42

Reflection Questions:

- In response to suffering where are Deadwood and Job alike, and where are they different?
- While God does not speak in Deadwood, God does speak in Job's speech. How would you summarize God's answers to Job? Do you think God's answer to Job actually answers Job's questions?

Suffering and the struggle to make sense of and meaning of it is the common ground of the Bible's Job and HBO's *Deadwood*. Job asks the hard questions, addressing God directly in frustration, pain, and even doubt. What the book of Job finally concludes, it seems, is that God's purpose in human suffering is beyond human knowing, but that in the face of suffering there is something to be gained in talking not only with friends and so-called comforters, but with God as well—to God above all. *Deadwood* presses the directness of Job's accusation of God to the next level, putting the fear and pain of Job's prayers into a truly contemporary vulgar vernacular; to paraphrase Doc. Cochran slightly, "If my suffering is God's will, then God is an S.O.B."

Together Job and *Deadwood* take seriously a crisis that we all face, the crisis of suffering that seems unjust. And together Job and *Deadwood* can help us begin to make sense of the complex matrix of faith, suffering, and God, by speaking out loud the tension that often defines life and faith.

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<http://www.sbl-site.org/educational/teachingbible.aspx>