



3

Shema Israel

Bible Correspondance Course



Evil and suffering

What is Truth?

A strange question perhaps, yet one that expresses both our confusion and our skepticism regarding truth. Confusion, because with a multiplicity of religions and a diversity of beliefs around us we may genuinely wonder, “*Where is the truth?*” Skepticism, for it suggests that truth does not exist; in fact, there really is no objective truth.

The Hebrew Bible, the *Tanakh*, answers the question clearly. “*Hashem, God is the truth*” (Jeremiah 10:10; literal translation). For the Bible then, truth does exist; truth *is* association with God Himself. In fact, truth, *Emeth*, in the Hebrew language, is one of the 13 attributes of God. It falls seventh in the list in the exact center of the 13 attributes listed in Exodus 34:6; literal translation, a passage that is recited in the liturgies of Rosh Ha-Shanah Yom Kippur (Jewish New Year, Day of Atonement).

If truth is identified with God’s character, it does not come from us but is to be found outside of us – in God. This recognition implies that in order to find the truth we should not approach it with the preconceived idea that we know what the truth is. Instead, we should approach the truth with a question, “*What is it?*” This is the very same question, in fact, the ancient Israelites asked when confronted with the *manna*, the bread of God in the wilderness. “*What is it?*” they asked, and the question gave the name to this heavenly bread, for the Hebrew word *manna* means “*What is it?*” The meaning of the word *manna* suggests an important lesson regarding how we should approach Biblical truth. We should approach it with the question: “*What is it? What is truth?*” We should approach it with the same humble and honest mindset as the ancient Israelites approached the *manna* in the wilderness, asking “*What is it?*” Asking the question from this frame of reference no longer suggests confusion or skepticism. Instead, it implies sincere questioning from one who expects a true answer from above.

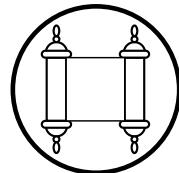
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BIBLE STUDY – Lesson 3*

Evil and Suffering



notes

Shut Up!

The liturgy of Kippur tells the strange and shocking story of ten rabbis tortured to death by the Romans.

The prayer book says, “Then a heavenly voice shouted at God, ‘Is this the Torah and its reward?’ And God answered, ‘Shut up, otherwise I will destroy the world.’”

Amid suffering, only silence is relevant. Words of comfort and explanations are out of place. Debates and words will never resolve the problem. They will only distort, or make it unbearable.

Yet keeping silence before pain means being its accomplice. The Talmud says, “To remain silent is to agree.” The witness who keeps quiet is as guilty as the criminal. To be silent before suffering is to admit the normality of evil and ultimately to close oneself off to hope. Therefore the Bible which reflects all the suffering of the world answers with a shout and silence together. In the heart of suffering, and the silence of the victim, we hear the shouts of Job who revolts, of the Psalmist who hopes, and of God who is angry. On the other hand, the heavy and embarrassing silence of Job’s friends, as well as their pedantic words, tortured the miserable who needed something more.

Before suffering, silence may be adequate or scandalous; words may be opportune or bitter. In regard to suffering, it is both difficult to speak, and to keep quiet.

* Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are taken from the New International Reader's Version of the Bible, Copyright 1998, by the Zondervan Corporation.

1. Where does suffering and evil come from?

The Lord God said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten the fruit of the tree I commanded you not to eat” (Genesis 3:11)? (human responsibility)

Then the Lord said to Satan, “Have you thought about my servant Job? There isn’t anyone on earth like him. He is honest. He does what is right. He has respect for me and avoids evil. You tried to turn me against him. You wanted me to destroy him without any reason. But he still continues to be faithful” (Job 2:3). (Satan’s assaults come “without any reason”).

2. Why do we suffer?

In my meaningless life here’s what I’ve seen. I’ve seen a godly man dying even though he is godly. And I’ve seen a sinful man living a long time even though he is sinful (Ecclesiastes 7:15). (cf. Job 5:7) (human condition)

The Lord spoke to Aaron. He said, “You, your sons and your father’s family are in charge of the sacred tent. You will be held accountable for sins that are committed against it. And you and your sons will be held accountable for sins that are committed against the office of priest

(Numbers 18:1). (cf. Ezekiel 14:10)
(We bear the fruit of our sins.)

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- “The righteous reproached Adam, saying, ‘You are the cause of our death.’ He replied: ‘I was guilty of one sin, but there is not a person among you who is not guilty of many iniquities’” (Tanhuma Buber, *Hukkat*, 39).
- “R. Ami said: ‘There is no death without sin and no suffering without transgression’” (*Shabbat* 55a).

3. Where does Satan come from?

...you thought you were the bright morning star. But now you have fallen from heaven! You once brought nations down. But now you have been thrown down to the earth (Isaiah 14:12)! (cf. Ezekiel 28:14 – 17)

4. What is the Biblical attitude towards suffering?

“I’m sick of living. So I’ll talk openly about my problems. I speak out because my spirit is bitter...” (Job 10: 1). (cf. Job 3:22-24) (revolt: “why?”) (cf. Psalm 94:3; 74:10) (hope: “how long?”)

5. What is God's responsibility in suffering and evil?

Your eyes are too pure to look at what is evil. You can't put up with the wrong things people do. So why do you put up with those who can't be trusted? The evil Babylonians swallow up those who are more godly than themselves. So why are you silent (Habakkuk 1:13)? (God is innocent) (cf. Job 42:7-8)

6. Why is God not responsible for evil and suffering in this world?

So God created man in His own likeness. He created him in the likeness of God. He created them as male and female...God saw everything he had made. And it was very good (Genesis 1:27, 31). (The world was "good" and "very good.") (cf. Ecclesiastes 7:29) (God created man "right.")

7. Why does the Bible sometimes present God as the agent of evil and suffering?

"Look! I am the One! There is no other God except me. I put some people to death. I bring others to life. I have wounded, and I will heal. No one can save you from my powerful hand (Deuteronomy 32:39). (God is the only God!) (cf. 2 Samuel 24:1)

- “Everything is in the power of Heaven except the fear of Heaven” (*Ber.* 83b).

8. Who is designated in the Bible as the actual agent of evil in the world?

The Lord said to Satan, “All right. I am handing everything he has over to you. But do not touch the man himself” (Job 2:6). (cf. Job 1:12) (in his hand)

Now it is time for the world to be judged. Now the prince of this world will be thrown out (John 12:31). (The prince of this world) (cf. Matthew 13:28)

- R. Joshua states that the verse, “‘the earth is given into the hand of the wicked’ applies to Satan” (*BB.* 16a).

9. Where is God when we suffer?

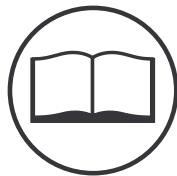
Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid. You are with me. Your shepherd’s rod and staff comfort me (Psalm 23:4). (cf. 91:15)

- God is with the suffering one. One horrible day in the concentration camp, young Elie Wiesel had to witness the hanging of two adult prisoners and a young boy...”

a child with a refined and beautiful face, unheard of in this camp. He had the face of a sad angel.” Whereas the two adults were immediately dead when the chairs tipped over, “the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive...For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. Behind me, I heard [someone] asking: ‘Where is God now?’ And I heard a voice within me answer him: ‘Where is He? Here He is – He is hanging here on this gallows...’” (Elie Wiesel, *The Night*, translated by Stella Rodway [New York: Hill and Wang, 1960], pp. 69-71).

10. How does God respond to our present suffering?

God comforts us: *You can be sure that I will comfort Zion’s people. I will look with loving concern on all of their destroyed buildings. I will make their deserts like Eden. I will make their dry and empty land like my very own garden. Joy and gladness will be there. People will sing and give thanks to me* (Isaiah 51:3).



God hears: *The Lord said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground* (Genesis 4:10). (cf. Psalm 10:17; Exodus 2:23-25)

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11. What does God do when confronted with our present suffering?

God hears and intervenes: *Great is your love for me. You have kept me from going down into the grave* (Psalm 86:13). (cf. Exodus 3:7-8)

12. Why does God suffer?

Our sins: *But you have not bought any sweet smelling cane for me. You have not given me the fattest parts of your animal sacrifices. Instead, you have loaded me down with your sins. You have made me tired with the wrong things you have done* (Isaiah 43:24). (cf. Isaiah 63:9)

13. What is the Biblical mechanism which could bring the end of suffering and evil?

God’s forgiveness: *Blessed is the one whose lawless acts are forgiven. His sins have been taken away* (Psalm 32:1).

- The Hebrew verb for “forgiveness” *nasa* means “to

bear,” to forgive the sin means “to bear the sin.”

14. How was God’s forgiveness achieved in the Bible?

The elders of the community must place their hands on the bull’s head in the sight of the Lord. The bull must be killed in the sight of the Lord...He must do the same thing with that bull as he did with the bull for the sin offering. When he does, he will pay for the sin of the people. And they will be forgiven (Leviticus 4:15, 20).

15. What is the only radical solution to suffering and evil in this world?

And I will be full of joy because of Jerusalem. I will take delight in my people. Sobbing and crying will not be heard there anymore (Isaiah 65:19).

Suffering is familiar to all of us. It is part of life. In fact, suffering has been an inherent part of the Jewish experience since its earliest days. “*Schwer zu sein Hayid*” (It is hard to be a Jew) says the old Yiddish proverb. For the Christian also, suffering has become a crucial theological concern and it has even been praised for its value. For every human being, in fact, suffering is *the issue*. Suffering takes on many forms. Sometimes it is the bomb which explodes and mutilates, the sniper who heartlessly picks off his victims, or the earthquake which shakes the ground and levels buildings. Yet whether it is a terrorist attack, famine, or war, the story is always the same. In the midst of these tragedies, there are always innocent victims. No need to travel far to meet suffering. It overruns the landscape of our lives. A mother holds her dying child in her arms, disease erodes a man’s flesh, and adultery tears a couple apart leaving one astonished and in pain. An individual is singled out for no reason other than he is black, a Jew, or she is a woman. A worker is humiliated and endures subtle abuse for a piece of bread, or a paycheck. And the shouts rise, and the story never knows a happy ending, and the skies remain silent, as heavy as lead.

The Silence of God

“**T**here is a place in hell for anyone who keeps silence before a moral question,” remarked Abraham Lincoln. And there is here more

¹ Jacques Doukhan, “The Problem of Suffering,” Shabbat Shalom, December 1994, 11-14.

than a mere moral question. Holocausts are repeated, from Germany to Rwanda, from Cambodia to Croatia. And it appears that God does not react. He is silent. And we do not understand. If, indeed, God exists, then a good God would not allow it. *What kind of God is this who loves, has the power to step in, and yet does not intervene?* This question is thrown in the face of believers, or brews beneath the surface of their own doubts, as well. Traditionally, religious people have tried to give an answer to God's strange silence. They have tried to explain, to justify God, for religion and its values were at stake. All kinds of theories have been elaborated. Theologians call these systems "theodicy." Some interpret suffering as a necessary "test" which we must accept because it is God's will. Afterwards we will understand. For the time being, we must endure by faith. Thus they have created in the minds of many believers what has been denounced by others as "the opium of the people." It is true, indeed, that religion has often been used as a drug to erode human sensitivity and thereby produce those "heroes" of faith who display an eternal smile throughout all ordeals. "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). By faith they submit themselves to God. They believe that all suffering comes from God and therefore it is for their own good. Thus God's silence makes sense and pertains to a definite plan. The believer trusts and settles into a wonderful peace which frightens some and inspires others.

In fact, the Bible attests on this point to one more misunderstanding. Instead of

prescribing a beatific trust, or even an enduring submission, the Bible testifies throughout its pages to the great shout of the prophets who never accepted this suffering condition. Abraham, the nomad who did not stay in his tent when he heard that fire was about to fall on the city, went out and cried at God and discussed with Him (Genesis 18). Jacob, the dreamer, did not stay sleeping on his stone, but he risked his life and wrestled with God and boldly begged for God's protection (Genesis 3:24-32). Moses, the great leader, left his blessed communion on the mountain and stood up against God to obtain life for his people (Exodus 32:11-13). Job, the miserable, who did not just complain about his wounds, threw himself against God and yelled at Him his confusion and his revolt (Job 9:22-24; 10:1-3). The prophets did not just preach and exhort the people to be righteous; they also shouted at God and cried at His feet, revolted and tormented from the pain they suffered, or they saw in their prophetic visions (Jeremiah 10:8). From the heart of the Hebrew Bible, from the Psalms which crossed the whole history of Israel, this cry resounds several times, forever suspended in the void: "How long?" (Psalms 94:3; 74:10; 89:47; 6:4, etc.). Also in the New Testament the same anguish seizes the "man of suffering" who cries about Jerusalem and the world and dies on a "Why?" The Bible does not promote submission to evil and suffering. On the contrary, the closer we draw to this God, the more we feel that all this evil is abnormal and does not make sense (see Psalms 10:1; 42:10, 44:25). For God is really outside of this tragedy. As for those who accuse Him of being a part of it,

people like Job's friends who mean well; they are rejected and denounced by God Himself, "You have not spoken of me what is right" (Job 47: 7).

God is Innocent

According to the Bible, God is innocent because suffering is described as the natural result of human iniquity. Suffering was not a part of God's initial plan. Originally God's creation was "very good." Humans are responsible for their own misfortune. The Genesis narratives indicate this reality from the start. As soon as men and women disobey, harmony is broken. The animal kingdom surges against humans (Genesis 3:1, 13, 15), man against woman (Genesis 3:12, 16, 17), nature against humans (Genesis 3: 18, 19), and humans against God (Genesis 3: 8-10, 22-24). The ecological balance was upset because of human beings. The same principle is seen in the biblical conception of the Promised Land, which threw out its sinful inhabitants (Leviticus 18:25, 28). The iniquity of the Israelites who murder, rob, and commit adultery (Hosea 4:2) influences the character of the country. "*That is why the land is drying up. All those who live in it are getting weaker and weaker. The wild animals and the birds of the air are dying. So are the fish in the ocean*" (verse 3). All suffering is interpreted here as a direct result of sin. This link of dependence between humans and their environment, between people and their posterity, constitutes one of the fundamental principles of

² Andre Neher, Clefs pour le Judaïsme (Paris: Schegers, 1977), p.27.

the Bible. “One of the main ideas of the Jewish tradition,” said André Neher, “is the importance of everything, of each action, of each word, of each thought of man. Nothing is indifferent. Everything has weight. Man in reality knows that very well. But he wants to escape from the terrible responsibility.”²

Finally, God is declared innocent by the Bible, because the world is seen to be in the hands of a stranger. In fact, the first act of evil is initiated by someone who is neither God nor a human person. The Bible refers to the Serpent who embodies the external power of evil in Biblical tradition as well as in ancient Middle Eastern culture. Yet this power is not a mere mythological figure, but a historical reality. There in the book of Job where suffering is at its worst, God discloses the root of evil. Speaking to Satan who had come to ask God for permission to crush Job, God Himself recognizes, “he is in your hands” (Job 1:11, 12; cf. 2:4-6). The same statement is made by Yeshua in the New Testament who clearly identifies Satan as “the prince of this world” (John 12:31) and the only author of evil (Matthew 13:28, 29). This is why the Bible presents suffering as unfair and irrational. In fact, the first real suffering of human beings, the first experience of death, confirms this observation. Abel, justice and innocence personified, is killed. He dies for nothing, for he has committed no mistake; and his death does not serve any purpose, because he disappears without a trace. The name he bears, Abel, “vapor,” reveals the empty, illogical character of his tragic destiny.

The foremost illustration of suffering, of course, is Job. A key word in the story is *hinam*, meaning “gratuitous.” Job’s suffering is judged *hinam* by God Himself (Job 2:3). Against his three friends, who plead in favor of the justice of God in order to explain suffering, Job asserts that there are no reasons for suffering. The innocent together with the culprit are stricken. Here suffering is unfair (see Job 5:7). In this perspective, suffering has no reason to exist. Suffering does not serve any purpose, does not lead anywhere, and makes no sense (see Psalms 10:1; 42:10; 44:25).

The Solution to Suffering

But justified or not, suffering is always *suffering*, and explaining it at a human level does not solve anything. That is why in the end, the Bible deals with the problem of suffering in two ways.

First, God’s answer to suffering is His own suffering. God suffers because of humans. God suffers when people commit iniquity that separates them from Him. One has an insight into this concept through the questioning of God in search of Adam and Eve, after the fall, when He cried, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:10). God suffers when He is unable to find lost humans. Then, before the Flood, the text is still more explicit. “*The Lord saw how bad the sins of man had become on the earth. All of the thoughts in his heart were always directed only toward what was evil. ‘The Lord was*

very sad that He had made man on the earth. His heart was filled with pain”

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(Genesis 6:5, 6). The Lord says also: “You have made me tired with the wrong things you have done” (Isaiah 43:24).

The Bible is filled with the lamentations of a God anguished because of His people’s sin (Isaiah 1:2, 3). Abraham Heschel comments on this last passage of Isaiah: “The words of the prophet bear not on the anger of God, but rather on the suffering of God. The prophet pleads with us so that we may understand the condition of a father who has been abandoned by his children.”³ God also suffers when He sees humans engaged in sin, not only because sin separates them from Him, but also because He knows all the suffering that iniquity brings. At the same time, God suffers because of His incapacity to stop humans. “*Where are you?*” He asked in the garden. It seems as if humans were now slipping away from His control. God will not do anything that infringes on people’s free will, and thus He suffers from seeing what people do with their free will (see Isaiah 63:9; Psalm 23:4). But God goes even further. He suffers for humans. He carries and endures the sins of humans. The Hebrew word *nasa*, which means “to carry,” is also used in the sense of “to forgive” (Hosea 1:6). The image here suggests that the forgiveness of sin necessarily involves the suffering of God, who chooses to carry the sins of His people. This idea is admirably translated in the famous passage of Isaiah 53, where the

³ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p.80.

suffering servant is described as bearing the sins of the people, thus providing for them forgiveness. *“But the servant was pierced because we had sinned. He was crushed because we had done what was evil. He was punished to make us whole again. His wounds have healed us...He took the sins of many people on Himself”* (Isaiah 53:5-12). This particular principle gives the sacrificial system its significance. The animal carries the sins of the people and thus ensures the forgiveness of sins (Leviticus 4:15, 20). The Biblical idea of forgiveness is thus attached to the idea of suffering. And as God is the only one capable of forgiving (Psalm 32:1, 2), suffering that consists of carrying sins for the purpose of forgiveness should be understood as the suffering of God Himself. Second, God’s answer to suffering is deliverance from it. Certainly, this act of His can already be observed in life and throughout history. God is already the Savior down here. His ever-presence has protected them. In His love and clemency, He has delivered them (see Isaiah 63:8, 9).

The Bible is full of miracles of God, which override all rules and make humans automatically fall on their knees and worship. The sick are healed (Genesis 20: 17; 2 Kings 20:5), the dead resurrected (2 Kings 13:21), the powerful enemy overcome (Exodus 15:1 ff.). Sometimes in the Bible, man is blessed by a supernatural visit, which surprises him and illuminates his path, making him feel high and happy.

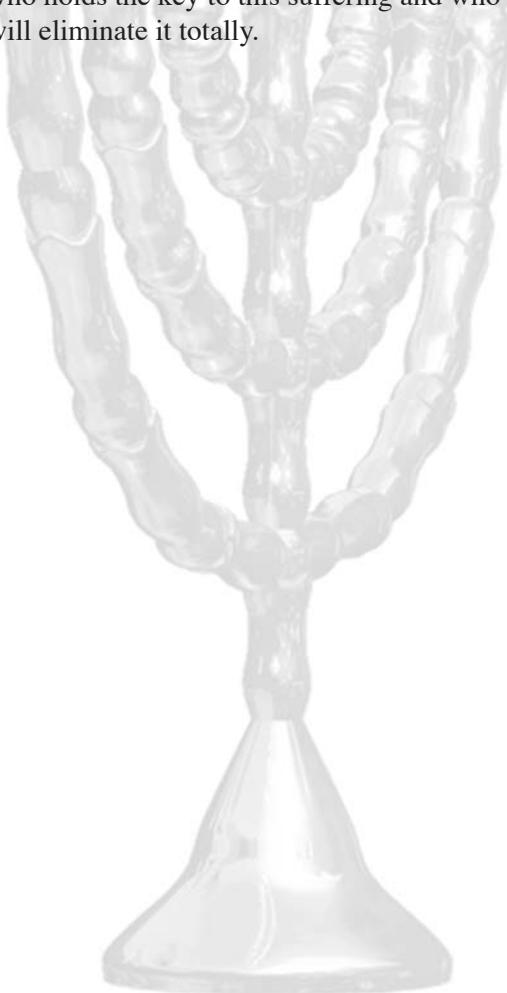
But soon after, the healed becomes sick again (Genesis 48:1), the resurrected ends

up dying (John 12:9), and Israel, after all the miracles, is oppressed and dispersed (Daniel 1:1, 2). Job perfectly illustrates this point. Beyond the miracle that has restored Job to his first estate, death awaits him. The book of Job ends not with the miracle, but with the death of the hero (Job 42:17). The problem is therefore not solved within our present existence, something that Job understood. To Eliphaz, (one of Job's friends) the present holds the answer to suffering (Job 15) but for Job it's found only in the future (Job 19:25-27). The future carries the real solution to suffering. The prophet Isaiah prophesies about the New Jerusalem: "*And I will be full of joy because of Jerusalem. I will take delight in my people. Sobbing and crying will not be heard there anymore.*" (Isaiah 65:19). To reach this point, however, God starts all over again. The new city is not the result of people's progress. Instead, it is recreated by God. So that suffering and death will be no more, humans and the universe must go through the miracle of creation.

Significantly, when God finally answers Job's questions about suffering (Job 31:35), He does it through a long speech about creation (Job 38-41). For creation is the only solution, the hope of something radically new and different. There is not another solution to suffering. Easy to say, but what shall we do in the meantime? In the meantime, the only way out is to resist and to fight. To resist and to fight suffering in view of the future, precisely because of what we see beyond ... Paradoxically, the experience of suffering, because it confronts men and women with death and the absurd,

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awakens within them the nostalgia for life, for happiness, and for the other City (the New Jerusalem). Instead of testifying against God, suffering on the contrary draws Him nearer to us. He is the only Innocent to suffer, the only One who is able to suffer with each one of us, the only One, indeed, who holds the key to this suffering and who will eliminate it totally.



notes

רְאֵל אַזָּפָר

לֹל כִּי כְּמִזְוֹת יְהָכֵל
בְּטַעַגְלָל.—לְדַקְקָה לְאַפְנָן שְׁנוֹת
לְאָ-אִירָאָן—
לְבָטָר וּמְלֻלָּקָה הַמָּה נְגַתָּנָה
לְגָדָרְרִי
כוֹסִי רְיוֹוִרִי
כָּלִי-יְצִיּוּרִי
לְאַרְךְ יְמִים
מְהִילָּם כָּבֵד

בְּיַם

קֶרְבָּן

בְּמִזְוֹת דְּלָא יְ-בִּינְעָנָה
לְפֶשֶׁן. שְׂוֹבֵב יְ-זָהָב
לְפָמָּה כִּי-אַלְבָּזָא קְלָמָות
כִּ-אַחֲרָה עַטְדִּי.
תְּלַדְךְ לְפֶנְיָה שְׁלָזָבָע
—שְׂלָזָה בְּשַׁטְּבָע רַאֲשָׁה
אַךְ שְׁבָע וּמְסָד יְ-דַּנְפָּה
לְבָתִי בְּבִיתָג-יְ-הָוָה



*"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.
He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;
You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."*

Psalm 23, NKJV