

To Pimp a Damned Butterfly: Is It Wickedness, Is its Weakness?

**Part 1: The Damned & Delivered —The Concomitance of Salvation & Suffering in “FEAR.”
& The Book of Job**

By Stephen Pacheco

On the surface of Kendrick Lamar's, "FEAR.," a track off of his Grammy and now Pulitzer Prize-winning 2017 album *DAMN*. (and the only song he has ever deemed worthy of the title of a "perfect rhyme" (Touré, 2017)), exists a tripartite narrative expressing the evolving conception of the nature of his mortal fear:

In the **first verse**, it's the fear of his mother at the age of 7, a mostly innocuous fear tied to bodily punishment ("I beat yo ass, keep talkin' back / I beat yo ass, who bought you that?"), the plight of poverty ("I beat yo ass, you know my patience runnin' thin / I got buku payments to make / County building's on my ass, tryna take my food stamps away"), or transient encroachments of his freedom ("Go back outside, I beat yo ass, lil' n*gga / That homework better be finished, I beat yo ass... That TV better not be loud if you got it on").

In the **second**, at age 17, it's a more immediate fear of bodily extermination: a death both premature ("I'll prolly die anonymous, I'll prolly die with promises") and unavoidable ("I'll prolly die 'cause that's what you do when you're 17 / All worries in a hurry, I wish I controlled things") as a result of nothing more than the color of his skin and nature of his upbringing.

And in the **third**, at age 27, it's a circumstantial—yet no less pressing—fear, one in which he laments the suffering that stems from riches now that he has escaped from the fears of poverty ("When I was 27, I grew accustomed to more fear / Accumulated 10 times over throughout the years / My newfound life made all of me magnified / How many accolades do I need to block denial?").

And while the message of the song may appear somewhat straightforward at first—that we all suffer, we all fear, regardless of the socioeconomic or mental state we find ourselves in, for fear is the base state of our human nature and suffering is innate and not a demarcation of damnation—upon further examination, a deeper and more complex religious/existential quandary surfaces: a quandary that has been in existence for centuries before us and that will persist for centuries after we are gone.

For Kendrick Lamar isn't merely stating the universality of suffering: he is questioning how suffering and salvation can coexist. How can one be deemed worthy of salvation yet made to suffer on earth, presumably either as a consequence of their actions (which would seem contradictory to their salvation) or as a consequence of God's blind wrath (which would be discomfoting to say the least, and *also* perceived as antithetical to the concept of divine will and salvation). In simplified terms, how can good people suffer from evil? In addition, while navigating this question and maintaining a "conceptualization of God [that] reflects a western dichotomy that prizes good over evil," he also grapples with the consequences of a commingling of the two—the liminal stage between, and possible mixing, that good and evil; for, "what if the very thing he's relying on for salvation is the thing that's killing him?" (Carmichael, 2017). Could it be possible that God—and therefore faith—equally condemns and delivers? Saves us, but also makes us suffer in a way we only conceived of Satan as being capable of? This question, though expressed through lyrical introspection and sonic escapism on the album, is not just one that he must grapple with alone. For Lamar—as Rodney Carmichael asserts in his NPR Music Review, "The Prophetic Struggle of Kendrick Lamar's 'DAMN.'"—is "unearthing more than [just] *his* personal fears here," as he did previously on his introductory offering, *Good Kid m.A.A.d City*. Because with *DAMN*. "his struggles serve as proxy for the human condition, a mirror image of America's own dark soul," in the same way that the story of Job in the Bible served as a proxy for the suffering and salvation of mankind in

biblical times. The same question that Kendrick asks throughout the album and throughout this song in particular is the same song Job asks: “Why God, why God do I gotta suffer?”

But to understand where their conceptions of good and evil, Heaven and Hell, suffering and damnation differ, we must first understand the men behind the ideologies. Job was a rich and prosperous man, with enormous wealth, a healthy family, and a blameless reputation who had found favor in the eyes of God. Yet Satan—who exists more within the narrative cracks of Job than explicitly as a dynamic manifestation like that of the Satan in *Paradise Lost*—challenges Job’s “goodness,” asserting that his goodness is a result of his blessings, and that as soon as he faces suffering he will turn from God to spite him. God, in order to demonstrate not only his might but also the nature of suffering and salvation, obliges, and allows Satan to replace his abundance with absence (“The LORD said to Satan, ‘Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life.’ So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head.” (Job 2:6-7)). From here on out, the story becomes one of Job’s earthly suffering—yet a suffering that does not necessitate damnation, but can coexist with salvation. Job remains blameless—he repents, accepts his pain, acknowledges the power of the Almighty, and praises the Lord for all that he has and not all that he endures—eventually leading to the restoration of his wealth and his lineage, culminating in prosperity and old age. Yet, although all of this was done to demonstrate that:

- (1) there is Godly intentionality in suffering,
- (2) hardship must not always be equated with punishment for sin or eternal damnation, and
- (3) times of tribulation are a time to praise God—to see what he will use the situation *for* instead of what the situation reflects about the morality of the person enduring it—

the initial perceived cruelty and senselessness of God in the face of pure praise and blamelessness from Job nonetheless leaves modern readers uncomfortable and conflicted. As author and professor Karl Plank expounded, in his article “Raging Wisdom: A Banner of Defiance Unfurled:”

“The sages find in Job the source of a devastating quandary, for depicted there is not the clear speech of Dame Wisdom, but God’s silence; not the ordered justice of a universe, but divine capriciousness; not the blessing of the wise, but the cursing of the righteous. With Job, the sages must add innocent suffering to their list of worldly concerns. With Job, the sages’ sense of cosmic order becomes impaled on the spurs of theodicy, fractured in the tension between divine justice and arbitrary misery. . . in utter starkness, we become witness to a capricious torture and in that deed view the unmasking of God’s other face: in Job, God is the enemy . . . and worse, an enemy who maims with-out reasons” (Plank, 1987).

Interestingly, Kendrick himself seems to weigh *both* possibilities, conflicted in his understandings of the duality—that of divine *purpose* and intentionality in inflicting suffering upon mankind, and that of divine *chaos* in a universe trapped in arbitrary and random acts of omnipotent Godly will. This indecision and duality, a tension between warring ideals mirrored and expressed over battling cords and instrumentation within “FEAR,” is a theme that lies at the heart of *DAMN.*, an album cohesively conflicted and purposefully unresolved in all of its messages and ponderings: “Is it wickedness, is it weakness?” “Damned if I do, if I don’t.” “I got loyalty, got royalty inside my DNA / Cocaine quarter piece, got war and peace inside my DNA.” Kendrick constantly sees both sides of an argument, but instead of choosing a side often believes they are both valid, and can co-exist—even if that union breeds tension and conflict. For, as Kendrick himself said in particular about the song “FEAR” in a letter penned to DJ Booth on the religiosity of his album:

“So in conclusion, I feel it's my calling to share the joy of God, but with exclamation, more so, the FEAR OF GOD. The balance. Knowing the power in what he can build, and also what he can destroy. At any given moment. My balance is to tell you what will make Him extinguish you. Personally, once that idea of real fear registered in my mind, it made me try harder at choosing my battles wisely. Which will forever be tough, because I'm still of flesh. I wanna spread this truth to my listeners. It's a journey, but it will be my key to the Kingdom.” (Kendrick, 2017).

Just like Job, Kendrick recognizes the productivity and promise inherent in seemingly senseless stints of suffering, as it leads to “try[ing] harder,” “choosing battles wisely,” and the ability to perceive and praise the full extent of God’s power. However, a textual analysis will demonstrate that there are major discrepancies between the narratives, and therefore between Job and Kendrick as God-fearing men —despite their common strivings—both looking to satisfy the Lord and seek his power. These discrepancies lie in either their wholehearted (Job) or wavering (Kendrick) faith in God, demonstrated during times of trial.

The Discrepancy: The Language of Suffering

(1) *“Why God, why God do I gotta suffer?
Pain in my heart carry burdens full of struggle
Why God, why God do I gotta bleed?
Every stone thrown at you restin' at my feet
Why God, why God do I gotta suffer?
Earth is no more, won't you burn this mub'fucka?
I don't think I could find a way to make it on this
earth”*

-Kendrick Lamar, “FEAR”

(2) *“I'm talkin' fear, fear that it's wickedness or
weakness
Fear, whatever it is, both is distinctive
Fear, what happens on Earth stays on Earth
And I can't take these feelings with me, so hopefully
they disperse
Within fourteen tracks, carried out over wax
Searchin' for resolutions until somebody get back*

*God damn you, God damn me
God damn us, God damn we
God damn us all”*

-Kendrick Lamar, “FEAR”

(3) *“The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away,
blessed be the name of the Lord.”*

-Job 1:21

(4) *“Behold, blessed is the one whom God reproves,
therefore despise not the discipline of the Almighty.
For he wounds, but he binds up, he shatters, but his
hands heal.”*

-Job 5:17-18

(5) *“Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him. Even
so, I will defend my own ways before Him.”*

-Job 13:15

(6) *“As long as my breath is in me, and the spirit of
God is in my nostrils, my lips will not speak
falsehood, and my tongue will not utter deceit.”*

-Job 27:3-4

While Kendrick and Job may agree that God's inflicted suffering is not only inevitable but even has its positive corollaries and necessity, they express their faith in his divine judgment and their security in his divine will in vastly different ways. Whereas Job focuses on the eternal, Kendrick is obsessed with the earthly. Job believes in patience, while Kendrick demands answers. Job remains expectant and unwavering, whereas Kendrick is pessimistic and vacillating. Job stresses blessings at the same time Kendrick proclaims damnation—and Job embraces castigation while Kendrick rebukes it. Kendrick isn't even certain that the suffering on earth—or any action or state of being, positive or negative, for that matter—is transferrable to heaven, and questions whether this suffering has been exacted on him as a result of his own wickedness (where Satan exists between the cracks, filling the void with temptation and fear) or weakness. Job, on the other hand, is firm in the knowledge of his salvation, and embraces both his own wickedness and weakness, acknowledging that only God may heal those wounds and provide that peace. Most importantly, whereas Satan *lost* his battle with God and Job, as both denied him the ability to inflict uncertainty and suffering on Job's will to live and praise of the Lord (for God *rebuked* Job in order to display divine providence in the face of suffering, and Job *suffered* with an understanding of the divine providence in place to protect him through it all), Satan alternatively appears to have Kendrick in his grasps—doubting God, fearing damnation, and questioning his beliefs. It is ironic that the only message of certainty and concrete suggestion within the song comes not from Kendrick, but his cousin—“until we come back to these commandments, until you come back to these commandments, we're gonna feel this way, we're gonna be under this curse. Because He said He's gonna punish us.”

Kendrick, therefore, even though explicitly expressing his fears through his lyrics that he may be in the same position as Job—“All this money, is God playin' a joke on me? / Is it for the moment, and will he see me as Job? / Take it from me and leave me worse than I was before?”—is actually more aligned with those in the biblical narrative who question or condemn Job for his perceived sins than with himself—that being his wife and his three friends. For they are unable to separate wickedness from weakness, suffering from damnation, and pain from evil. Like Kendrick, they don't know if they can believe that salvation can stem from suffering, but think that suffering is a mark of the damned. Of the sinner. A direct reflection of his immorality and iniquities. Kendrick aligns less so with Job, and more so with his detractors, as he seems to share their views on damnation and the plight of the wicked:

Job's Wife: *“Then his wife said to him, ‘Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die!’ But he said to her, ‘You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?’ In all of this Job did not sin with his lips” (Job 2:9-10).*

Eliphaz: *“Is not your evil abundant? There is no end to your iniquities” (Job 22:5).*

Bildad: *“Indeed, the light of the wicked is put out, and the flame of his fire does not shine” (Job 18:5).*

Zophar: *“But the eyes of the wicked will fail; all way of escape will be lost to them, and their hope is to breathe their last” (Job 11:20).*

Job understands that righteous people do suffer—*have to suffer*—in order to achieve salvation, and doesn't perceive that suffering to be a sign of his *immorality* but a sign of God's *immortality*, His ultimate and divine power and eternal throne. But Kendrick stands with the detractors, fearful of his damnation and that of his people, allowing Satan to take hold and imbue his heart with the noxious fumes of doubt and despair. This is a marked difference from the Kendrick of yesteryear—a

Kendrick who on *To Pimp a Butterfly*'s celebratory anthem "i" announced, "I done been through a whole lot / Trial, tribulation, but I know God / The Devil wanna put me in a bow tie / Pray that the holy water don't go dry!" It appears that here, on "FEAR." just two years later, the seeds of *damnation* have supplanted that of his sense of *salvation*, and—literally and metaphorically—his "i" has been washed away by "FEAR."

For while some may decide that when "at one point [in 'FEAR.' the chorus ends and] bits and pieces of a chant are reversed" Kendrick is "mimicking the sound of speaking in tongues, and amplifying the feel of a *divine experience*" (Okoth-Obbo, 2017) as Pigeons and Planes described it in their editorial review of *DAMN*., I personally don't see it as "*a divine experience*" at all. At the moment Kendrick is heard speaking in tongues, I see Satan—the same one that inhabited the body of the blameless little girl from *The Exorcist* to speak in reverse through the conduit of her mouth. I see Satan: inhabiting the body and tongue of Kendrick, planting the seeds of fear and damnation, and cutting him off from the divine knowledge of salvation from suffering that allows Job to continue striving in the face of that pain. In "FEAR." I don't see God. I see the Devil. And it appears that he's not just *wanting* to put Kendrick in a bow tie anymore: he's already started looping the fabric around his neck.