

## "The Impatience of Job"

The Book of Job is one of the literary masterpieces of the Old Testament. Almost the entire book is poetry - Hebrew poetry - other than the first 2 chapters and part of the last chapter.

The first 2 chapters give the setting of the story. Job is described as a good man, a godly man: "There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1). He was blessed with 7 sons, 3 daughters, and much wealth.

One day, however, Job's goodness and piety are questioned by one of the members of the heavenly council, "satan". The Hebrew here reads "*the* satan". At the time the Book of Job was written Satan was not thought of as the arch enemy of God, but actually an angel in good standing in the heavenly council. It was his duty to act as a sort of FBI agent in the world, hunting out evil. When God boasts about His servant Job, "the satan" suspects Job is only serving God for selfish reasons, for what he can get out of it. Satan asks the Lord: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (Job 1:9). In other words, doesn't he have ulterior, selfish motives for serving You?

So he makes a wager with God, that if God will permit Job's family and possessions to be stripped from him, Job's faith will be destroyed. God says, "OK, let's see."

Then the bottom falls out of Job's life. He loses all his flocks and herds. All of his children are killed when the roof of their house caves in on them during a windstorm. Job contracts a skin disease, and is covered with sores all over his body. He becomes a pathetic creature, sitting on an ash heap.

Now the portrait of Job in the first 2 chapters is that of a subdued, patient person who quietly accepts his fate. This is where we get the idea of the "patience of Job". "Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. He said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.' In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing" (Job 1:20-22). Job's wife urges him to curse God and die. Job answers: "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad. In all this Job did not sin with his lips" (Job 2:10).

However, when we move out of the prose section and into the heart of the book, Job comes through in a much different way! The meek man who calmly accepts his fate is now pictured as a *rebel*, a man who lashes out against his fate, saying he doesn't deserve it!

Not long after these catastrophes hit, 3 of Job's friends come to console him. Most of the book is made up of Job's conversation with these 3 friends named Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. If you've never read the Book of Job (or haven't read it lately), I'd suggest that you read this marvelous book and get the feel of the intense dialogue between Job and his 3 friends.

Job begins the conversation by cursing the day of his birth! It would have been better if he had

never been born! "Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire?" (Job 3:11). Eliphaz speaks up: "I've never seen anyone suffer who didn't suffer because of *sin*. Job, you must have sinned to bring this terrible plight upon yourself. If I were you, I'd seek God, "and to God I would commit my cause" (Job 5:8). Eliphaz here represents the *orthodox, traditional view* that if you are good person you'll be wealthy and successful, and if you sin, bad things will happen to you. But Job doesn't buy this argument. "I haven't done anything to deserve this!"

Then some of his feelings of bitterness and despair surface: He wants to die: "O that I might have my request, and that God would grant my desire; that it would please God to crush me, that he would let loose his hand and cut me off!" (Job 6:8-9). He's impatient: "And what is my end, that I should be patient" (Job 6:11). In anguish he cries out: "My eye will never again see good" (Job 7:7). Job wishes God would just go away and leave him alone! Job says to God, "Will you not look away from me for a while, let me alone until I swallow my spit?" (Job 7:19).

Another of Job's friends, Bildad, now joins conversation. What he says sounds a lot like what Eliphaz had said, "Job, you *must* have sinned in some way to deserve this. Turn to God and everything will be all right." But Job declares, "I'm innocent!"

Then Zophar, the third friend, chimes in: "Job, if sin is in your hand, put it far from you. Then things will get better and your fortunes will be restored." Job reacts sarcastically: "I'm not inferior to you!" Then he says, "I want to speak with God, and argue my case before Him" (Job 13:3). He tells Zophar, "If you had any sense, you'd shut your mouth and quit talking!" (cf. 13:5)

All 3 friends have spoken with Job. Now they begin again, and the second round of conversation is more heated! Eliphaz warns: "You're doing away with the fear of God" (Job 15:4). He ranks Job in the company of atheists! Job comes back at him: "I'm pure! I'm innocent!" And he wishes that God would vindicate him and show them that he's not guilty of any great sin.

It's Bildad's turn again. He paints a vivid picture of the terrible things that happen to the wicked. Job answers that God's not fair! (Job 19:7) "I call aloud, but there is no justice." In one mood, Job wishes God would leave him alone. But on the other hand he wishes he could meet God - but he sees God as remote and hidden - "Oh, that I knew where I might find him" (Job 23:3) he laments.

The third friend, Zophar, speaks again, trying to argue the same point he made before: that the wicked suffer poverty, punishment, and untimely death, and the righteous are prosperous and happy. Once again Job challenges this conventional wisdom: the wicked are *not* always punished!

A third round of conversation ensues between Job and his friends. It sounds familiar. His friends insist that the wicked suffer, so Job must have done something bad. Job vehemently denies any wrongdoing. *Maybe*, he says, *after death, beyond the grave*, his innocence will be proved. In one of the few Old Testament Scriptures that suggest a life beyond the grave, Job offers a tiny glimpse of hope: "For I know that my vindicator lives and that in the end he will

stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me! (Job 19:25-27). But finally, Job challenges God! "Let the Almighty answer me! (Job 31:35).

*And God does answer him!* God speaks out of a whirlwind to this brash, bitter man who would dare question God's wisdom and fairness! But God doesn't really answer Job's questions. And God doesn't say, "You're right, Job. You *are* innocent. You *are* blameless." Rather, God reminds Job that Job is just a *creature*, and God is *Creator*. Because of that, our human, finite minds cannot fully comprehend God's wisdom or purposes. God rebukes Job! The Almighty says, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, *I will question you, and you shall declare to me*" (Job 38:2-3).

Job chapter 38 is a marvelous section of Scripture, where God describes some of the wonders of His creation, and then asks if Job was present when God first made it all. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, 'Thus far shall you come and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped'? Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place...declare, if you know all this" (Job 38:4-12, 16-18).

See, Job has looked only at *his own suffering* and *his own situation*. And he's been acting like he knows exactly how the Lord should run the universe! But God's saying it is *impossible* for Job, or anyone, to fully comprehend what God is doing. And our first obligation is to acknowledge and glorify God the Creator.

Well now, God's speech raised questions Job couldn't answer. He's humbled and silenced. He had presumed to know too much. He takes back his rash accusations against the Almighty, and he *repents*. "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know...I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:3, 5-6). Once Job confesses his foolishness and ignorance he's given a new sense of connection with God. Prior to this he had experienced God "second hand" (by hearsay), but now he experiences God *personally*.

*The Book of Job introduces us to that age-old problem of suffering.* Of course, not all suffering is a mystery. People do stupid things and have to live with the consequences. We do wrong, and as a result we hurt ourselves, and others. But, on the other hand, sometimes we suffer as innocent victims, or experience misfortunes and tragedies that just don't make sense. Aren't there times when you and I have felt some of the anguish, the despair, the questioning that Job felt? Haven't we ever asked from deep inside us, "Why, God, why did this happen?" Or, like

Job, we think life isn't fair. God isn't fair. Or, we see people suffer and terrible things happen and we say to ourselves, "If *I* were running this world, I would have stopped this from happening (assuming that we could give the Almighty a few pointers on how to run the universe!).

And, you know, when we confront suffering and human tragedy, pat answers don't really cut it, do they? There always seem to be people around, like Job's friends, who have pat, easy answers for life's baffling mysteries.

There are still those who maintain that if a person suffers, he or she is being punished for some specific bad things they've done. But Jesus, I believe, as well as Book of Job, dispelled this simplistic way of explaining things.

There are people - like Job's friends - who tell us that good people prosper and are happy and secure, and bad people get the short end of the stick. We only need to turn on the TV and listen to "prosperity gospel" preachers, who promise that if you obey God you'll be well off and materially blessed. (And especially if you donate to their ministry)!

The Book of Job shoots holes in that theology! After Villanova University won the NCAA basketball tournament in 1985, coach Rollie Massamino said, "When you're a good person, and you work hard, good things happen to you." I can hear Job saying, "But Rollie, it doesn't *always* work that way!"

Job questioned God. People today can sometimes be afraid to question God. Job's friends were afraid to question God, to examine their traditional belief system. But the remarkable thing is that in the end, *Job has to pray for his friends and intercede for them!* Why? Because their easy acceptance of shallow traditional answers kept them from a mature faith in God. And it's Job - who questions, who rants and raves and shakes his fist at God in anger, Job - who is justified, and experiences God in a new and fresh way. Don't be afraid of *honest doubts and questions* - for often it's when we struggle with God the most that our faith grows and matures the most.

*It's impossible for us to fully know what God is doing.* His will and His ways are beyond our capacity to fully comprehend. We can't see the "big picture" as God does. We view things with blinders on - and are focused on *this person's* suffering or *that group's* misfortune, and ask "Why?" But God's purposes involve *all of His creation* - not just people in our viewfinder! We are limited too because we can only evaluate things based on what happens *in this life, in this world* - but God's plans and purposes encompass all of *eternity*.

The Book of Job doesn't really solve the mystery of human suffering - why some suffer and others don't. It goes beyond the question of *suffering* to the matter of *Job's relationship with God*. Before God spoke to him, Job knew God only by what tradition taught, by what he had heard from others. But when God spoke to him, he was put in his place, and he was reminded that God is God and Job is merely a finite human being. He saw that God's ways are above our ways. He repented. And through this, *Job came to a personal trust in God and a first-hand experience of God*.

In light of Job's experience, the ultimate question is not whether or not we can understand and explain why we suffer - but rather, what is our relationship with God? When we know God through our faith in Jesus, and when we come to experience God's redeeming love in Christ, we can face suffering with the confidence that we are in God's hands, and that God is working out His eternal purposes in our life. We can accept even what we cannot understand. And we can join the Apostle Paul in affirming that "in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

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