

Praying¹

One cannot understand the Biblical teaching on suffering without coming to grips with the book of Job. No other book of the Bible, or any other ancient literature, faces the question of evil and suffering with such emotion and philosophical deftness. The main theme of Job is innocent suffering—why do so many good people have a disproportionate number of afflictions and tragedies, while many dishonest, selfish, and greedy people have comfortable lives? The book shows us that suffering is both a philosophical as well as a deeply personal issue.

Job is unique in that it critiques nearly all the common answers to the problem of suffering. The traditional religious response is: *You must have done something wrong or bad.* The secular answer is: *There is no good reason. A good God wouldn't allow this—so he doesn't exist or he's cruel.* Both answers are given withering critiques in Job. The religious answer expressed by Job's friends is revealed to be slanderously wrong: Job's difficulties come upon him not despite his goodness, but because of it. But the nihilistic view, which Job veers toward at times, is also a grave mistake.

My Servant Job

The first two chapters of Job introduce us to a good and godly man, a man beyond reproach (1:1), a caring father and husband, deeply devoted to God, just and compassionate, successful and wealthy, the “greatest man” in the East (1:3). Suddenly Job is inexplicably overtaken by a series of disasters. Why? The reader is given a glimpse into events taking place in the heavenly councils which Job never sees. This view of heaven raises a lot of questions (why is Satan there?) that are not answered. (We should not build a speculative theology from about heaven, angels and Satan.) God points to Job as his finest servant (1:8). Satan responds the Job is in relationship with God merely for the benefits. “He doesn't serve and love *you*. He is only loving himself, serving himself and using you to do it.” Satan is saying that obeying God is just an exercise in self-love and self-salvation. This is really an attack on God. If Job, God's best servant, is a phony, then it means God has completely failed to make any men or women into his loving servants. Satan hates good. He knows the heart of love God has for humanity, so he wants to defeat God's purpose to turn mankind into a joy-filled, great and good worshippers of him. Satan wants to frustrate the great desire of God's heart.

Becoming “Free Lovers” of God

Thus God allows Satan to test Job. Why? God knew Job loved him, but God wanted to further refine this love. There is a difference between external religiosity and internal heart love and devotion to God. Do we love God for himself alone or for the benefits he brings? We may fall in love with a person for their “assets,” and as your relationship deepens and some of the assets go away, you don't mind. We call this growth in love and character. If our relationship with God grows in this way, change in our circumstances wouldn't bother us because we have a deeper relationship with God.

How does development take place? The primary way is through suffering. Suffering helps you assess yourself to see the mercenary nature of your relationship with God. It also gives you an opportunity to focus on God instead of giving up. Job was not fully the servant he should be, and could be, and God was going to enable him to attain that kind of greatness the only way it can be attained—through adversity and pain.

God and Evil

Some might read the first chapters of Job and conclude that Satan is on an equal footing with God, that life is a battlefield, a “crap shoot” because there is no one single force in charge. This is certainly not what Job teaches us. God is completely in charge; Satan can go so far, and no further. God is sovereign. We also learn from Job is that God is not inflicting these troubles on Job. While nothing happens outside of God's plan, God does not will evil things like he wills the good. Evil and suffering are not God's original intent for the world. They are only a temporary condition until the world is renewed.

Job's initial response to the loss of his wealth and children is to express grief, he is not stoic. He still shows gratitude (“the Lord gave”) and deference to God (“the Lord has taken away”). But when he also loses his health, he loses his

¹ Material taken/quoted from Tim Keller, *Walking with God through pain and suffering*, chapter 14.

poise. He does not curse God, turn away from him or contemplate suicide. But he also struggles with what he sees as a great injustice.

The Speeches of Job and His Friends

The middle part of Job is three long cycles of speeches by Job and his friends who come to comfort him. Their message is clear. Job wouldn't be suffering like this unless he had failed to pray, trust, or obey God in some way. Their approach is uncomfortably close to conventional evangelical piety. Yes, there *is* a moral order to universe, bad behavior *can* lead to painful circumstances; we *should* trust God and humble ourselves before him. We might be in the position of a David or Jonah. While his friends were technically right, they fail to understand the grace of God. They have a moralistic theology: suffering does not happen naturally—it only happens if you live wrongly and bring it on yourself. They were essentially saying that God can be managed—he is under obligation to human morality. They ignore Genesis 3:16. The world is broken by sin and bad things do happen to people regardless of how well they live.

Job (Ch. 6) rejects his friends' analysis. It would have been easier for Job to go in either the traditional religious or irreligious direction. He refuses both; as a result his agony is enormous. He would rather die because he is concerned that he speak against God (6:8-10). In the following cycles, Job not only debates with his friends but also cries out to God, asking the perennial questions of sufferers—Why this? And Why me?

As readers we learn that Job's sufferings are not punitive, they are not retribution for his sin. Neither are they corrective. Slowly but surely it emerges that the purpose of Job's suffering is an enlarged life with God. If Job had agreed with his friends' diagnosis, he would have missed the whole purpose of what he was experiencing. He was being called to live on a higher plane. Job seems to begin to understand this; he expresses a desire to meet God and hear directly from him. While God does appear and speak, there are four great shocks and surprises.

The Lord Appears—and Job Lives

(I.) The Lord shows up and does not destroy Job. He does appear to judge or crush Job. The term for God here is Yahweh, the name God uses with those in a covenantal, love relationship with Him. God answers. The Hebrew term used for God speaking to Job is not the idea of a one way communication, but a dialogue. God comes to invite Job into a relationship. (God even invites Job to have the final word! 42:1-6). God comes in his fullness and brings Job to an overwhelming experience of the reality of God. This is not a rebuke or warning about questioning God, but a gracious advent of a God who allows himself to be seen inasmuch as is humanly possible.

Still, God does come in a storm, a hurricane-force windstorm. A true paradox: God comes both as a gracious, personal God and as an infinite, overwhelming force—at the same time. How can this be? Only in Jesus Christ do we see how the untamable, infinity God can become a baby and a loving savior.

God Does Not Answer—and Yet Does

(II.) Job expected an *explanation* from God; his friends expected a *condemnation*. God does neither. He gives us long poetic discourses about the wonders of the natural world. God gives no explanation of what happened in heaven, no consolation for Job's pain, no encouragement to hang in there! One commentator states that this test would only work if Job did *not* know what it was for. Only in this way could Job enter into a live of naked faith, to learn to love God for himself alone. Suffering becomes one of God's most precious gifts. By withholding the full story from Job, God keeps him walking by faith, even after the test was over. It is because we don't fully love God just for his own sake that we are subject to such great ups and downs depending on how things go in our lives. We do not find our hearts fully satisfied with God unless other things are also going well. But to grow into a true "free lover" of God, we must go through a stripping.

So the expanded life with God can only come to Job by God's *not* telling him why he suffered. Suffering leads Job to a place where he trusts God simply because he is God. Job becomes a person of enormous strength and joy, who does not need favorable circumstances in order to stand up straight spiritually. Job never sees the big picture, he only sees God.

The Lord is God—and You Are Not (III.)

God challenges Job to consider the creation of the world. The point is to allow Job to see that humans have only the most infinitesimal knowledge of all God has put into creation. The point is simple: We are not God. His knowledge and power are infinitely beyond ours. Yet we question how God is running the world? Because Job does not have the power to judge, he does not have the right. Job is being called to hand the whole matter over completely to God more trustingly, less fretfully. And do it without insisting that God should first answer all his questions. This is the way of wisdom—to willingly, not begrudgingly, admit that God alone is God. To propose that we can tell God how to better run the universe is not only to usurp the role of God, become another Satan.

Job Is in the Right—and You Are in the Wrong

(IV.) Job's friends expected God would condemn Job, but instead God tells the friends that their legalistic, self-justifying, retribution theology was wrong and Job's insistence that he was innocent was correct. Why does God vindicate Job so strongly? First because God is gracious and forgiving. But also notice that through it all Job never stopped praying. Yes he complained, he doubted, he screamed and yelled, but he complained, doubted and screamed and yelled to *God*. No matter how much agony he was in, he continued to address God. Job triumphed not because it was all fine or that Job's heart and motives were always right, but because Job's doggedness in seeking the face and presence of God meant that *the suffering did not drive him away for God but toward him*. That made all the difference.

One of the most basic lessons we can learn from Job is that God is near to the brokenhearted (Ps 34:18), he upholds all who fall, and lifts up all who are bowed down (Ps. 145:14), he helps us when we groan (Rom. 8:26) and will never leave or forsake us (Heb. 13:5). All this means that even if we cannot feel God in our darkest and most dry time, he is still there. Like Job, we must seek him, go to him. Pray even when you are dry. Read the scriptures even if it is an agony. The darkness will not last forever.

In Psalm 42, the psalmist pours out his soul. This means he looks honestly at his doubts, desires, fears and hopes before God. And then he not only listens to his heart, he talks to his heart. When our heart says, "It is hopeless!" we should argue back. This is an important strategy. We must learn to take ourselves in hand. In spiritual depression we allow our self to talk to us instead of talking to our self. Much of the unhappiness in our lives is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself. Remind yourself of who God is, and what God is and what God has done and what God has pledged himself to do. Build biblical content into your soul. It is important to at least *want* to love God.

"My Servant Job"—Again

Job's final reply to God (42:2-6) is an act of worship, not a begrudging knuckling under, for Job calls God "wonderful." Job admits his demands had not taken into consideration the wonder of who God is. He admits that God has plans behind everything that happens, even if those plans are hidden. Job states that he had heard about God, but now "my eyes have seen you." This means that the abstract concepts of God's power, majesty, and might had not really gripped his heart. God's presence had shaken him out of his desire for self-justification, his insistence in explanation and public vindication and his belief that he knew better. The change in Job is as much a matter of spiritual experience as deeper theology. Job abandons his self-justification project. He retracts his demand that God, because of Job's righteousness, must give him explanation and public vindication. He gives up trying to control God.

The Other Innocent Sufferer

While God came in a terrifying storm, he came as Yahweh. He never accuses Job of sin. This suffering is not punishment. Job was right with God.

We have this same assurance not because of our inherent personal goodness, but because of Jesus' work on our behalf. Jesus, the only truly innocent sufferer, becomes our friend.