

## **Job - The Problem of Suffering**

Almost everyone has at some time struggled with the problem of suffering. Why does this or that person suffer while another seems not to; are they suffering because they have done something bad? Why does God allow so much suffering? We know that suffering came into the world because of sin – that is understandable, but it doesn't explain why one person should suffer more than another. The book of Job helps us to understand this from God's point of view.

This book is among what is known as 'Wisdom literature', together with Psalms, the Song of Solomon etc., written during the time of the kings and the exile, although it seems that Job himself lived about the time of Abraham. Apart from the actual narrative at the beginning and end, it consists of a discussion – or rather a dispute – between Job and his three friends, written in poetic style, (It is difficult to imagine that people would really speak so long and eloquently during such an angry dispute!) and finally there is a dramatic intervention by God Himself.

In order to make sense of the drama we should note what God Himself says about Job. In Ezekiel 14 God says that Israel has sinned so greatly that He intends to destroy them, and that even if Noah, Daniel and Job were there they would save only themselves. (v.14-20) This shows how highly God regarded Job. At the beginning of the story of Job the Lord describes him as

*"... a man of blameless and upright life, who fears God and sets his face against wrongdoing."* (1:8) and at the end He spoke angrily against the three friends that *"unlike My servant Job, you have not spoken as you ought about Me."* (42:7)

### **The narrative**

The believers (*sons of God*) came before (the angel of) God and the adversary (Heb. Satan) was among them. The Lord asked this adversary whether he had considered the good character of His servant Job, but the adversary said that Job was only good because God protected and blessed him. So the Lord gave the adversary permission to test Job by taking everything away from him, even his sons and daughters and his health. In spite of all that, Job didn't utter one sinful word. (2:10)

It is important to notice that this adversary doesn't appear again in the story; it is God Himself who brings all the afflictions on Job: *"You incited Me to ruin him without cause ..."* (2:3) So it is not important who he is; Job understood that it was the Lord who was afflicting him.

### **The debate**

Job's three friends came to comfort him. Here is a very brief summary of their speeches:

Job – It would have been better if I had never been born!

Eliphaz – Why are you complaining? God only punishes the wicked. Submit to that and you will be all right.

Job – God has brought such terrible suffering on me – should I not cry out? Tell me what I have done to deserve this. Shouldn't I expect help from my friends? 'God, why are you making me suffer?'

Bildad – God is not unjust; only the wicked suffer. If you were pure and good everything would be all right.

Job – I know that God is all-powerful; I can't demand an answer from Him. Even though I don't deserve such punishment I can't answer Him. I only ask 'Tell me why You are angry with me. Didn't You create me? Why?'

Zophar – In fact God is punishing you less than you deserve! Stop sinning and ask for forgiveness, then all will be well.

Job – I know very well that God rules everything – even the animals know that – however I want to argue with Him because I am innocent. You are lying when you accuse me. 'God, please take away Your hand from me, and tell me what my sins and crimes are.'

Eliphaz – Your own words condemn you; I know that only sinners suffer.

Job – If you were in my place I would console you, but instead of comforting me you accuse me. I am suffering, though I never used violence against anyone. God Himself will decide between us.

Bildad – Do not talk like that! Only the wicked suffer and they will finally be destroyed.

Job – How much longer will you insult me? It is God who is treating me unjustly. Everyone despises me, even my wife – have pity on me!

Zophar – Don't you know that since time began it is the wicked person who suffers God's punishment?

Job – Listen! In fact that is not the case; the wicked live happy, carefree lives. They don't worship God, yet they still prosper. Don't you know that the good and the bad, the rich and the poor all lie down together in the tomb? Your 'comfort' is false.

Eliphaz – Does it matter to God whether you are righteous or wicked? God is punishing you, therefore you must have sinned greatly, so stop sinning and you will be saved.

Job – If only I could reach God I would set out my arguments; then He would acquit me. The wicked will fall in the end; that is certain.

Bildad – No mere mortal can be right in God's sight.

Job – You are no help at all. I will never lie. I know that I am innocent of the sins you accuse me of.

[Here there is a chapter (28) on wisdom: only God knows where wisdom can be found.]

If only things were as they were before, when I was respected! Now everyone mocks me. My body is afflicted; I cry to God but he does not answer. I know that I am innocent. That is my final word.

The young man Elihu now intervened with his opinion:

None of you has found an answer. Job claims to be innocent, yet he accuses God of injustice and blasphemes. God always punishes the wicked. It doesn't matter to God whether you are sinful or righteous; that doesn't affect Him. Think how great, just and all-powerful He is; think how amazing is His creation. We cannot understand Him, so we must revere Him.

It is obvious that Job, the three friends and Elihu all believed firmly that if God afflicted anyone, it followed that he or she was a sinner. So, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, the friends and Elihu decided that Job must have sinned greatly, while Job himself knew quite well that he had

not. Thus the dispute became more and more acrimonious, Job protesting his innocence and the others refusing to believe him. Such is human nature! As the saying goes, 'With friends like that, who needs enemies?'

For the friends the matter was simple, but not for Job. He not only suffered the loss of everything including his health, but also the scorn and accusations of everyone, and he couldn't understand why. He appealed to God for an explanation; that He would have compassion and forgive; he pleaded for a mediator; in his distress he even suggested that God was acting unjustly, although he acknowledged that God was really just.

### **God Intervenes**

Suddenly, after the dispute had reached stalemate, there was a great storm, and the Lord spoke to Job. It is easy to imagine what a shock this was to them all. Now the Lord Himself asked questions in a most eloquent, majestic description of His creation – questions to which Job acknowledged that he had no answer. (40:1-5) Again the Lord urged Job to answer whether he really dared to accuse God in order to demonstrate his own righteousness. (40:6-14) Then Job confessed that he had spoken of things he had not understood, things too wonderful for him. (42:3) He said *"I yield, repenting in dust and ashes."* (42:8)

We might expect, and probably the friends did, that God would then demand a burnt offering from Job. Quite the reverse! The Lord was angry with the three friends and ordered them to make an offering, and said that Job would pray for them so that they would not be punished. Why? *"... because you have not spoken as you ought about Me as he has done."* (42:8)

There seem to be several things in this account worth thinking about, for example: even though, after so much suffering, Job was satisfied and received even more blessings from the Lord, he never, in fact, received any explanation. God never answered his questions about why he had suffered so much without cause. This is an important lesson for us all. We are only human beings; we can speak to God but we have no right to demand anything; God does not have to give us any explanation. The prophet Habakkuk, like Job, complained to God about injustice, and he didn't get an explanation either, as to why God didn't punish the wicked. God only told him that they would be punished at the right time. Habakkuk thought about what God had already done, about His power, and he was satisfied to be glad about that. For Job it was enough that *"... now I see You with my own eyes."* (42:5) Did he really see the Lord? No, but he now understood better; he had acquired a wider perspective of the greatness of God. He had learned that he must trust God whatever happened, whether or not he understood the reason.

Another thought-provoking matter is how willingly Job agreed to be a mediator between his friends and God, so that God would not punish them. He had every reason to be very indignant at their false accusations, but no, he forgave them immediately.

Thinking of God's accusation against the friends – what was it that they had said about God which was untrue? They acknowledged that He is all-powerful and just, but they (and Elihu) said that it doesn't matter to Him whether people are righteous or wicked. (22:3) That is absolutely untrue. God loves people and wants to save them; it grieves Him when they turn away from Him. That becomes even more evident throughout the New Testament, and when Jesus came every one of us can say 'Now I see you with my own eyes.' In the Lord Jesus we see the character of God – Jesus, who wept over Jerusalem because they wouldn't let him save them. (Lk. 13:34)

How did Jesus learn to accept that he must suffer such unmerited affliction? We cannot be sure, of course, but we can imagine the young Jesus, while he was growing up, realising what he would have to suffer in order to fulfill his Father's will. The account of Job's experience would have been helpful to him because he, even more than Job, was without sin, yet suffered. His people refused to accept him and finally murdered him, but he, like Job, became not only a mediator but the way of forgiveness for everyone who believes in him.

So whenever we suffer we can encourage ourselves, knowing that God is not punishing us – quite the reverse. By suffering God teaches us to trust Him. Like Job we will come to understand God more deeply. Like Jesus we also will be able to learn obedience through suffering. (Heb.5:8) James, writing about suffering teaches that we shouldn't grumble: *"You have heard how Job stood firm."* (James 5:11) Paul explained that believers *"... have been justified through faith ... at peace with God ... even exult in our present sufferings, because we know that suffering is a source of endurance ..."* (Rom. 5:1-5) If we truly trust in God, instead of asking 'Why? Why?' we should ask ourselves 'What does God want me to learn from this?' We need to think of Job and, even more importantly, of Jesus, and pray; that will help us to bear whatever happens. We know that in the end *"He will wipe away every tear ... there shall be an end to death, and to mourning and crying and pain, for the old order has passed away!"* (Rev. 21:3-5)

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