

Lessons from Job

We left Job a couple of weeks ago feeling very humbled and yet very satisfied after his confrontation with God -- the confrontation he had been seeking throughout the many chapters of dialogue between him and his three friends. When Job got what he had asked for, he found that God wanted to ask him questions and he didn't have an answer for any of them. He found himself on the defensive, his confidence in his desire for "justice" was gone and he had nothing left to say. Quite the reversal from earlier.

As we've looked at the broad, sweeping themes of Job, we haven't stopped to look closely at the lessons that are there for us to learn. I mentioned at the beginning that this is one of the books of Hebrew Wisdom literature and that wisdom is the skill of living well. So, how does Job teach us to live well and what are the lessons we can grasp in order to grow in wisdom and in living in a godly way?

The first big lesson from this book is what it means to be a worshiper. Job is one of the most profound examples of a worshiper in all of Scripture. There are others, of course, like Abraham, like David, who teach us something about worshipping God. But Job is the man who says, "No matter what happens to me, in whatever circumstances I find myself, God is and always will be worthy of my praise."

Remember back to the first chapter when Job has just received the news that his children have all been killed by the collapse of the house they were in.

Job stood up and tore his robe in grief. Then he shaved his head and fell to the ground before God.

Notice that little phrase: he fell to the ground "before God".

I came naked from my mother's womb and I will be stripped of everything when I die. Yahweh gave me everything I had and Yahweh has taken it away.

Praise the name of Yahweh!

That's as strong and clear an indication of a worshiper that you'll find anywhere. Job postured himself before God and expressed his grief to God and then spent most of the rest of the book crying out for justice from God. Job wasn't looking around at others for his clues on how to act. He was looking to God and was responding to God -- that's the sign of someone who has his or her life oriented in the right direction.

Then, when everything fell apart for Job, and he lost his children, all his possessions, the source of his wealth, he was both overcome with grief and he continued to show that he was a worshiper. "Yahweh gave me everything I had" is a recognition of God's provision. "Yahweh has taken it away" is a recognition of God's sovereignty. "Praise the name of Yahweh" is a recognition of God's worthiness, His holiness, His majesty, despite Job's own loss and grief and fear.

All human beings have doubts. We believe in God, but are not sure that He believes in us. We believe in God, but are not sure that He really loves us because we've had to face such hard things in our lives. Is God really caring for us, answering our prayers, delivering us from the schemes of the evil one, or do we just hope He is? It

seems second nature for us to question everything, to want to know more than we can know, and especially when it comes to God. Sometimes doubt becomes huge, overwhelming, and that seems to happen most often in really difficult circumstances, when nothing seems to be going right, when prayers don't seem to be answered -- faith slips to a low ebb. When that happens, we need to learn from Job, to be as ready as he was for anything that came his way.

In John 4, during a conversation Jesus had with a woman of ill repute at a well outside Sychar in Samaria, Jesus told us that the Father is looking for worshipers. He did not say that the Father was looking for better worship. What He did say was that the Father was looking for a kind of person who is committed to worship, committed to bringing glory to God no matter what the circumstances. He might as well have said that the Father is looking for more people like Job who have set it in their hearts that they will choose to honour God in all circumstances.

That's what you hear when you listen to the words of the song we sing fairly often here, "Blessed be Your Name".

*Blessed be Your Name, in the land that is plentiful
Where Your streams of abundance flow Blessed be Your Name
Blessed be Your Name, when I'm found in the desert place
Though I walk through the wilderness Blessed be Your Name
Every blessing You pour out I'll turn back to praise
And when the darkness closes in, Lord, still I will say*

The next verse talks about blessing God when the sun is shining and everything is "as it should be" and also giving praise on the road marked with suffering, when there's pain in the offering. And then there's the bridge, from Job chapter 1: "You give and take away, you give and take away. My heart will choose to say, Lord, blessed be Your Name."

Ultimately, worship is not an emotion, not a spiritual high, but a decision. It's a choice to see God as greater than any circumstance we might be going through. It's a choice to bless God even when we don't understand His ways, which are, Isaiah tells us, higher than our ways. And I can't think of a more profound example of a worshiper than the example we have before us in the person of Job.

So, that's lesson #1 from Job -- a man answers the call of God's heart for worshipers and determines that he will be the kind of person who always honours his God.

Lesson #2 that we learn from Job is how to think about difficult situations, things that might make us angry with God, or frustrated in our faith. How did Job process all the losses he had experienced? He asked for justice, he demanded a hearing, he questioned. He wanted to know why this was all happening to him, feeling as though he had suffered more than he had deserved to suffer. And he was right -- he didn't deserve all that he had had to go through. But what did he gain from all his questioning and self-justifying? Nothing. He vented his grief, but he gained no new

understanding, no insight into God's ways and no comfort.

So, in this case, we don't want to do what Job did -- we want to learn from a mistake and avoid it in our own lives. The key here is to take life's challenges from the point of view of a learner. What is God trying to teach me? What can I learn from these circumstances that will help me to know Him and walk in His ways? I think I mentioned when we covered Job's complaints a message I had listened to from Mark Driscoll in which he recounted the history of Mars Hill church in Seattle. He kept describing how tough it was, how they once got only a week's notice that they had to move locations, how they had no money, how they struggled with the challenges they faced -- and how they whined to God about it all. Driscoll mentioned that he wasn't asking the right questions and the person interviewing him at that point asked what the right question would be. His response: he should have been asking God what he was supposed to be learning from the current crisis, the current situation which didn't seem to offer any way out.

As humble a man as Job was, he certainly felt that he deserved something more than he was getting and that he deserved an explanation for it all. He was proud enough to be stung by the way people now regarded him. He was proud enough to keep defending his integrity and recounting his righteousness. He was proud enough to long for the good old days when he was respected and looked up to at the city gate. There was a dignity about Job, a self-respect that drew the respect of others.

But when we face situations that are challenging to the core of our faith, we need to learn from what Job didn't do and to ask the questions that will help us grow. "God, what are You trying to teach me and how do you want me to respond?"

Third lesson: We can trust God even when we have no understanding of what He is doing. That may not seem like something we learn from Job. In fact, some people read this book and ask, "Why should I trust God when He is willing to allow such suffering and loss?" But there are indications in the text that God is protecting Job, even in the midst of his pain. For example, God puts limits on what He allows Satan to do, first protecting his health and later his life. So, when Job thought that his life would soon be over, he was speaking without knowledge of the limits God had set to protect him.

For us, it's important that when we are going through a trial we remember that there are limits to what we will have to endure. And it's important as well to remember that God who loved Job, also loves us, not in some theoretical, spiritual way -- but that He really cares about us. And He is preparing us to reign with Him in eternal glory, is continually training and testing us so that we can grow up into that future responsibility . . . and it is He, not Satan, not the enemy of our souls; it is this God who loves us who sets the limits to which we can be tested. It is God who gives us the strength to endure these trials and God who comforts us and encourages us when they are over. We can and should have a confidence in Him during every challenging situation in which we find ourselves.

Let's recap what we've covered so far:

1. Job teaches us that a worshiper is someone who has decided to honour God no matter what comes, no matter how challenging our circumstances are . . . and then Jesus teaches us that the Father is seeking out worshipers.
2. Job teaches us to take the stance of a learner in the midst of trials. While Job cried out for justice and asked God to defend his reputation, he should have been seeking to know what God could teach him through the difficulties he faced.
3. We need to learn to trust both God's power and His love -- both were at work in this story and both overcame the plans of Satan against Job.

Now, **lesson #4**: Be careful about giving people insight into the ways of God. We sometimes feel that it's our Christian duty to answer everyone's questions about God or to explain some difficult problem another person is having in understanding God's purposes in their lives. There are definitely things that we can say, and there are many things that we should not say. Here are a few of the things that I think we should avoid in such conversations:

- "God will always . . ." That's a dangerous opening line, because all we really know is that God will always act in a way that is consistent with His character. He will always be good and therefore all He does is good. He will always be holy and so He acts in ways consistent with His holiness. But that doesn't necessarily lead to an understanding of what's going on in the present. And it's especially dangerous if we say that God will always bless us with wealth or protect us from all harm or lead us beside still waters or something else that Scripture doesn't actually promise.
- The second dangerous thing to say is, "I think God is judging you." People say things like that about certain diseases, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, all sorts of things, but do they say them because they know? Or do they say things like that because they're guessing, they see it as a possibility and, amazed by their own insight and wisdom, tell anyone who will listen what they think?

How many times in Scripture do we see God speaking directly to a person about their sin, their need to repent, their need to change something in their lives? Was He able to get Jonah's attention when Jonah was disobedient? Was He able to confront Saul on the road to Damascus when He wanted to stop him from persecuting the church and make him into a builder of the church? Was God not able to speak to Moses when he disobeyed God and struck the rock instead of speaking to it in Numbers 20? Yes, God used His prophets to bring a call to repentance to David, to Eli, to many of the kings of Israel's history, but there were also many who spoke out things of their own imaginations, their own desires, their own political persuasions. They were called false prophets. You want to say something that favours the king when he's in the same room listening to what you're saying. Bottom line: if we're going to speak for God, we have to be sure that we've heard from God.

Lesson #5: It's more important that we know God than that we know why. When Job encountered God at the end of the story, he was humbled, he was in awe, he was content to let go of all his questions and he was able to forgive and to pray for his friends. He was never told why. God never said "Look, Job, this was a messy thing,

but your loyalty to Me was a great help in the battle to defeat the work of Satan on this earth. I know you suffered great losses and I'm going to make up for that now, but those great losses have brought about great gains for the Kingdom of God." There was nothing like that -- the only thing we know is that God restored Job's fortunes and gave him a new family. Job, to the best of our knowledge, was never told why he had been forced to endure the persecutions that ripped his life apart and he was okay with that.

Why was he okay? He was okay because he had met God. He was okay because his eyes had been opened to a power and wisdom and awesomeness that he had never even imagined. The God that Job met in the final chapters was a being so far beyond Job's conceptions of Him that Job was absolutely stunned. He had nothing to say to this majesty, this greatness and glory. He had no further questions and he had no answer to the questions that God had asked him.

Our goal in life should be to know God. We can know Him through His word, through the presence of the Spirit in our lives, through the circumstances he takes us through and in our conversations with him in prayer. We will never exhaust the possibilities of knowing our God. There will always be more to learn about Him and to learn from Him. Seek to know Him more than you seek to know the answer to all the "why" questions you have.

Lesson #6: Evil is not always punished in this world, but there is a day when the righteous judge, Jesus Himself, will judge the world. He is the one who is able to know both the actions and the motives of all of us. He is the One who alone is qualified to separate the sheep from the goats, as He describes the picture for us in Matthew 25 and He will do these things. We won't find perfection on this earth -- perfect justice, perfect goodness, perfect anything, but, if we endure, we will find perfect justice and goodness and everything when Jesus makes all things right. There are signs of God's grace all around us, ways in which we can see His faithfulness and love for us, but the perfect delight will not be fully ours until justice is served and evil is banished.

Part of the answer to the question "why?" is simply to recognize the fact that this world is permeated with evil and that waiting for perfect justice means having to live with, to endure, a portion of the evil that is in the world. If you're feeling dissatisfied with God, feeling that He isn't fair or feeling like you've been hard done by, don't let that get a hold on you, because while you're waiting for vindication, He's waiting for the full number who are going to be saved to come in. While you're wondering where the justice is, He's waiting to bring full justice to the earth. Only His mercy makes Him wait.

Lesson #7: This one brings us back to the first lesson, the one on worship. God is greater, wiser, more powerful and able to see the end from the beginning. What we think, the solutions we would offer, the complaints we would make, are all from a tiny little perspective from one little portion of a great big world that God made in a massive solar system that is just a tiny part of a huge galaxy of billions of stars which

is just an ordinary galaxy in a universe that is huge beyond our ability to comprehend. God's wisdom is vastly superior to ours ... we have to know this! God's power is incomparably greater than ours ... we must accept this! And we must humble ourselves before the greatness of who He is and accept that, in our little speck of dust that we call planet Earth, we have no way to compare ourselves to Him. But we can also do this: we can also recognize that this great and powerful and majestic Creator is loving and kind and compassionate, that He forgives sins, that He is willing to show mercy to those who ask for it. God is great, and He is good, and we are so blessed to know it.

That's "seven lessons", all of which help us to know God better, to understand our lives in relation to God's purposes and to respond well to the challenges that we all face in living with wisdom and with faith.