

## Lessons from the Book of Job

Sometimes I think we ignore the big books from the Old Testament that we don't understand all that well and that have lots of chapters and we can't read at one sitting and when we do we're not sure we understand what the point was. We don't want to admit that to anybody -- at least to anybody in church -- so we just say we're reading the Bible and we have lots of questions.

One of those big books that has lots of chapters (42 in fact) is the book of Job. All the action takes place in chapters 1, 2 and 42. So you wouldn't read it for the action. Also, the position of the main actor is not the subject of this book -- he is seated in chapter one, stands briefly and then falls to the ground. For the rest of the book he is found seated in the dirt.

You don't read Job to find out anything about the history of Israel -- the nation made up of God's chosen people is not even mentioned and the setting appears to be in a period of time before, or at least roughly coinciding with, the time of Abraham.

Some people say that the book of Job is a book about suffering, that it addresses the question of human suffering in its pages. I think it's a book about worship and how we can grow in our worship through suffering -- but if you're looking for answers to the problem of pain in the world, the ones you find in Job may not be very satisfying for you.

Having said a few things about what Job is not, I will tell you that it is one of the richest books of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and a personal favourite of mine that I have spent quite a bit of time in through the years. What's called the "Wisdom Literature" consists of the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon, also called the Song of Songs. The outstanding feature of wisdom literature is that it tells you how to live. In Hebrew thought, wisdom is very practical -- it is the skill of living well, of living in the way that God wants you to live.

So, for example, Solomon begins the book of Proverbs by saying that the purpose for writing them is to give people instruction in discipline, good conduct, and doing what is right, just and fair. Then he starts his teaching by saying that the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge. That's where you start if you want to live life well, if you want to be truly successful.

That's the broad context for the book of Job. As wisdom literature, its purpose is not to teach history, ancient religious customs, or the Old Testament laws. Instead, its purpose is to teach wisdom, to help people understand what God is like and what is an appropriate way to respond to Him.

Because Job is 42 chapters long, I'm not going to teach the whole book in any depth, but I will be drawing lessons out of many sections of his story. We'll begin with the action -- Job faces some serious testing:

*There was a man named Job who lived in the land of Uz. He was blameless, a man of complete integrity. He feared God and stayed away from evil.*

“Where is Uz?” I thought I heard someone ask. The clues we have are that it was subject to attacks from Sabeans and Chaldeans, peoples who lived east of the Jordan, towards Arabia. Also, one of Job’s friends was from Teman, which is near Petra, south and east of the Dead Sea. The place must have been near a river, perhaps the Euphrates, or a body of fresh water such as the Sea of Galilee, because Job had a lot of animals to look after, as we’ll see in a moment. The common theory is that it is somewhere near the modern city of Damascus, although there are indications that it could have been quite a bit farther south.

Note that Job’s character was blameless. He was the ideal man in terms of wisdom and living the right way. Let’s continue:

*He had seven sons and three daughters. He owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred teams of oxen, and five hundred female donkeys, and he employed many servants. He was, in fact, the richest person in that entire area.*

The numbers of children and of animals are numbers that, in the Hebrew world, represented completeness. This man, literally, has it all, everything one could hope for.

The next paragraph describes how Job’s family would celebrate birthdays and how Job would be conscientious to offer sacrifices for them, just in case they had sinned while they partied. Note that this is a time before the law, before Moses, so Job’s sacrifices would be like those of Abraham, offered to honour Yahweh and to atone for sin.

And then enters the villain of the story, Satan, in v. 6:

*One day the angels came to present themselves before Yahweh and Satan the Accuser came with them. “Where have you come from?” Yahweh asked Satan. And Satan answered Yahweh, “I have been going back and forth across the earth, watching everything that’s going on.”*

*Then Yahweh asked Satan, “Have you noticed My servant Job? He is the finest man in all the earth -- a man of complete integrity. He fears God and will have nothing to do with evil.”*

*Satan replied to Yahweh, “Yes, Job fears God, but not without good reason! You have always protected him and his home and his property from harm. You have made him prosperous in everything he does. Look how rich he is! But take away everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.”*

*“All right, you may test him,” Yahweh said to Satan. “Do whatever you want with everything he possesses, but don’t harm him physically.” So Satan left Yahweh’s presence.*

Satan’s assumption here is that people will trust God when things are going well in life, but will turn against God when the circumstances of their life overwhelm them. And he has certainly had some successes over the years in helping people reach that place where they say, “I used to go to church, but . . . my cousin was killed in a car accident . . . my uncle died of a horrible disease . . . there were people in my church who hated each other . . . I read about what happened in residential schools.” That

phrase, "I used to go to church" is actually still one of the most common replies when people are asked about their spiritual experience, and it's always followed by "but".

So Satan had reason to hope that his strategy would work here and God had a reason to demonstrate, not so much to Satan but to us, that it wouldn't work in this case, in the case of a man who was truly devoted to his God.

*One day when Job's sons and daughters were dining at the oldest brother's house, a messenger arrived at Job's home with this news: "Your oxen were plowing, with the donkeys feeding beside them, when the Sabeans raided us. They stole all the animals and killed all the farmhands. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."*

*While he was still speaking, another messenger arrived with this news: "The fire of God has fallen from heaven and burned up your sheep and all the shepherds. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."*

*While he was still speaking, a third messenger arrived with this news: "Three bands of Chaldean raiders have stolen your camels and killed your servants. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."*

*While he was still speaking, another messenger arrived with this news: "Your sons and daughters were feasting in their oldest brother's home. Suddenly, a powerful wind swept in from the desert and hit the house on all sides. The house collapsed and all your children are dead. I am the only one who escaped to tell you.*

These events raise a lot of questions, and a lot of fears, in the minds of believers. Does Satan really have that much power? Can he rip our lives apart today like he did with Job? Is there no protection, no divine care for the believer or are we totally exposed? But these questions overlook the situation that has just been described. Satan tells the LORD that He has protected Job, that He has made him rich, and then challenges the reality of Job's faith. But then you may ask, "But what about us? Does God protect us for a little while and then tell Satan to have at us?" That may be a fear, but, again, it is ignoring the point of the story. This isn't a story about how much protection we have in this life -- it is the story about how one man's faith was tested and how he stood the test. The circumstances are unique to Job and should not be generalized out to the rest of us who believe in God and seek to follow His ways for our lives.

Our fears in life are based, not on Satan's power to have at us, but from living in a fallen, broken world where people who have rebelled against God's desires for them can hurt others around them. But, although we live in a fallen world, we also live under the amazing grace of our God, who watches over us, cares for us, answers our prayers and provides for our needs. We live under the curse that produces evil, that produces disease and death, in our world, but also with the incredible hope of eternal life in the presence of our King of love. In other words, it may not always be easy, but the end result will be wonderful!

But back to Job. He's been presented with four disasters within seconds of each other and he must have been reeling from shock and disbelief. His world is

shattered. Or is it?

*Job stood up and tore his robe in grief. Then he shaved his head and fell to the ground before God. He said, "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."*  
*In all of this, Job did not sin by blaming God.*

This is the first stunning lesson from the book of Job and it addresses the issue of bad things happening to good people. We know that pain and suffering come to all of us, sooner or later, but how are we supposed to deal with our encounters with the evil that permeates our world? We are not to blame God, to accuse Him of injustice, or to suggest that we would act with greater wisdom or greater compassion. All of those responses are misguided and blasphemous. All of them say that we are, even with our limited knowledge, greater than God and more capable of choosing wisely than He is. If you want to go there, and there are many voices making those kinds of comments in the world today, then you will have only your pride with which to defend yourself on the day of judgment.

Job, in true wisdom, does not think he is wiser than God. In fact, he demonstrates an amazing ability, even in the midst of huge personal losses, to see the whole scope of life and to conclude that he came into the world with nothing and will leave this life taking nothing with him. All that he has had to enjoy in life has been a gift from God and now it has all been taken away -- but God is still and always worthy to be praised.

The scene in heaven, the angels presenting themselves before Yahweh, and Satan among them is repeated at the beginning of chapter 2. Again God draws attention to Job and Job's righteous response to undeserved suffering. This time Satan's reply is:

*Skin for skin -- he blesses you only because you bless him. A man will give up everything he has to save his life. But take away his health, and he will surely curse you to your face.*

God gives Satan permission to attack Job's health, but he must not take his life. Job is afflicted with a severe case of boils that cover his whole body and leave him in unrelenting pain. He sits in the ashes, scraping his skin with a piece of broken pottery while his wife urges him to curse God and die. He replies to her:

*You talk like a godless woman. Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?*

Again, the writer points out that Job didn't say anything wrong in his reaction to these horrible circumstances.

What would be the wrong thing to say in a situation like this? It would be wrong to say that God is unjust, that we deserve better than what He has given us, that He doesn't act in wisdom or love, that He's cruel, lacks compassion or restraint in His dealings with us. Lots of people say just those kinds of things in our world today -- some of them even write books about what they perceive as God's failures, but Job does not.

He endures the suffering and refuses to engage in pointing fingers at God, in blaming his Creator or in calling Him unjust.

"Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?" That's a profound question. The answer is, to many modern minds, if God is good and if God is powerful, we should only expect good things to come from Him. We should never expect the kinds of evil that we see in the world today. We should never expect to see nations at war, or the personal evils of hatred, abuse, deception and violence that we see. Therefore, they conclude, either God is not powerful enough to change things or He is not good.

That's the arrogance of our times -- that we humans have a right to expect only good from God, that He should use His power to override our freedoms and to make all the evil that we participate in to turn into something beautiful for those around us. It's absolute arrogance and absolute foolishness as well. Why should God be held accountable for our bad choices? Why should we question His desire to make beings in His image, which means able to choose to obey or disobey, to participate in good or in evil? Why can't we see that in choosing to make humans that are not mere robots, doing only what God wants us to do and programs us to do and controls us to do, God created in us something that we value intensely and would never give up? We love our freedom, our creativity, our ability to take initiative, to take risks, to enjoy the adventure of life -- and somebody wants to blame God for making us this way and allowing us to choose evil as well as good?

One of the choices that we make because we were created with the freedom to make choices is that we will decide what to do in response to the problems created by the choices people make. Many look at the problems and use them as an excuse to shake their fists at God. Job looked at the devastating circumstances he was facing and said, "Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?" The one position is proud and accusing, the other is humble and accepting, even though that is very, very difficult to do.

Chapter two ends with a poignant scene in which three of Job's friends arrive to offer comfort to their friend.

*When they saw Job from a distance, they scarcely recognized him. Wailing loudly, they tore their robes and threw dust into the air over their heads to demonstrate their grief. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and nights. And no one said a word, for they saw that his suffering was too great for words.*

We find lots to be critical of in the friends' response to Job's suffering in the coming chapters, but this is a profound opening scene, both in the expression of grief - loud wailing, tearing their robes, throwing dust over themselves - and in the silence of seven days and nights of simply feeling their friend's pain. It's incredible -- who do you know who has ever been silent for seven days? And here are men who have opinions, who have judgments to make, who think they have insights into the ways of

God - but they see that Job's pain is too great and so they wait in silence for seven long days.

What a story! Out of the ancient world, from a time before the law, before the children of Israel were a people, there comes a story of a man whose faith in God is being challenged to the core. This is testing to the very limits of how a person can be tested. And in how Job responds to the testing that he endures, there is wisdom for all people and for all generations. Let's look at four important lessons that come from these opening 2 chapters:

1. There are things in the cosmos that are more important than my happiness. God is able to weigh those things in the balance of absolute goodness and justice and He is able to determine what degree of my happiness has to be sacrificed at this moment so that His greater purposes can be accomplished. I am not even aware of all those other factors and am certainly not able to judge where my happiness should fit in relation to them. That doesn't mean that I have not experienced the goodness of God or that He hasn't given me far more happiness than I deserve -- it just means that at those times when I feel less happy, I can't assume that God no longer knows what He is doing, or what is truly important. Can we agree on that?
2. Related to that first point is this: human wisdom always defers to God's wisdom. We know a certain amount, we develop values around that knowledge and we will even promote our values to others. But our knowledge is very limited and so the values that we develop around that knowledge are also limited. For example, when we read about the suffering of Christians in Southern Sudan at the hands of the Islamic government in the north, we can easily feel angry and even upset with God for not bringing deliverance to the people there. But we only know the present. We only see the here and now. The reality is that wherever the church has been persecuted, and especially in Southern Sudan, the growth of the church has been phenomenal. Hundreds of thousands of people will spend eternity with God in heaven because of the martyrdoms of hundreds of thousands more. Do we understand this? Do we like it? Do we agree with God for allowing it? Does it matter? You can decide all these questions when we have discussion time.
3. The third application is simply a summary of what Job teaches us as to how to respond to suffering. One, he sees the long term picture, that God has brought both blessing and suffering and he knows he takes nothing with him to the hereafter. Two, he recognizes that, even in the midst of painful personal circumstances, God is still worthy -- and so he falls on the ground in worship. And three, he doesn't accuse God of doing the wrong thing. With limited knowledge and with great reverence for Yahweh, he refuses to be God's judge.
4. The fourth application is not for all seasons, but it may come to us at some point. There are times when a true friend doesn't try to explain God or dismiss suffering, but when a true friend sits in silence and feels another's pain and grief.