

Job: Where is God in My Suffering?

We have been looking at the history of Israel, from the call of Abraham to the return from exile ... we've covered about 1600 years of history during our travels, from somewhere just over 2000 years before the birth of Jesus to the work of Ezra and Nehemiah just over 400 years before Bethlehem and the stories of angels, shepherds and wisemen.

When we get to the prophets we're going to be looking at a relatively narrow window, from about 900 BC to 400 BC, but when we look at the Wisdom Literature, the time frame opens up wide again. Especially when we look at today's book, where we may be looking all the way back to the time of Abraham.

The Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament consists of the books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon. By the way, if you missed last week's quiz question about which other book of the Old Testament doesn't mention God, besides the book of Esther, it is the Song of Solomon, or Song of Songs.

We're going to start with the book of Job. Why would we think that his story dates back to the time of Abraham? One of the reasons is that he lived so long. After all the trials that we read about in this book, at which point he must have been at least in his fifties, or later, we find that he now lived for another 140 years. That's the length of life of a patriarch of the early second or late third millennium. We also find the social situation and customs of the day point back to ancient times: wealth was measured in cattle, Job acted as a priest for his family; and Sabean raiders and Chaldean tribes fit into the second millennium as well. This is an ancient tale, passed down for many centuries, likely, until a Hebrew writer put it down, having been given revelation of the nature of hidden events by the LORD God. It is a priceless book of wisdom for anyone who suffers and especially for anyone whose suffering seems unjust.

Job is a long book -- it's 42 chapters, mostly of dialogue between Job and three good friends of his who represent to us the religious world view of the Hebrew people. Later on the Greeks would come along and say, "If God is good and if God is powerful, then how can we explain human suffering? How can we explain the problem of evil?" The Hebrew mind wouldn't ask the same question, at least not in the same way. The Hebrew person would assume that God is good and just, that He is powerful and that no person is righteous before Him. They had no problem with evil because they knew that we all deserved to suffer because we all carried evil thoughts and desires within us. So, they would not conclude that there is a problem on God's end of things at all -- the problem lies with us.

You can see where this leads. If someone suffers, they are getting what they deserve; they must have done something to bring on their trial - and are being punished. This was standard belief in ancient Israel, to the point of saying that the measure of a person's suffering was in proportion to the measure of their sin. And this was the theology presented in argument after argument by Job's three friends. The problem

was that it didn't line up with real life experience -- and that's often where false beliefs about God run into trouble. Job was not deserving of this greater measure of suffering that he was going through, and so his demand was for justice, for an opportunity to plead his case with God, while his friends kept on calling him to confess, to own the sin that caused the suffering.

Before we get into the story, I want to take you to chapter 29 where we get a picture of Job's character, the quality of his life that is being attacked by his friends.

*Because I rescued the poor who cried for help
And the fatherless who had none to assist him.
The man who was dying blessed me
I made the widow's heart sing
I put on righteousness as my clothing;
Justice was my robe and my turban
I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame
I was a father to the needy;
I took up the case of the stranger*

So Job wasn't just a clean-living fellow who was admired for his moral excellence. He was a compassionate care-giver to the poor, the outcast, those who had no one else to give them aid. His life wasn't just good, it was an example of the heart of God for the least fortunate in society. Now to the story:

In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. He had seven sons and three daughters, and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among the people of the East.

(1:1-3)

In verse 6 the writer introduces an unexpected element into the story -- a scene from heaven -- in which the angels of Yahweh presented themselves to Him. In this account Satan came with them and God asks him, "Have you considered My servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." (v.8) This is an exact repetition of the first verse, meaning that God's assessment of Job's character is the same as what people have observed about him, except that God adds the phrase, "There is no one on earth like him."

Satan then sets up the confrontation which will become the drama of the story:

Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But, stretch out Your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face. (1:9-11)

We are told in Scripture that Satan is "the accuser of the brethren". His method of dealing with us, both in our presence and in God's, is to accuse us, to point out our faults and failures. Look at what he does to Job in this very cynical and cutting

accusation. He says that Job's goodness is actually an evil thing, that he is only good because it pays so well, that God's blessing in Job's life has hidden the fact that Job is motivated by selfishness and continues to do good in order to keep the blessings coming. Most of that is not stated, but it is implied by the devil's final charge: "But stretch out Your hand and strike everything he has and he will surely curse you to your face." For God to continue to protect Job in the face of that evil accusation would have been to admit that Satan is right, that Job is not godly in his heart of hearts, but is an imposter, making a pretense of godliness. So God allows Satan to take away the blessings that Job has been experiencing from God for so long.

One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, and the Sabeans attacked and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you. (1:13-15)

Three more messengers come, announcing first, that fire from heaven had fallen and destroyed the sheep and the servants attending them, second, that Chaldean raiders had stolen all the camels and killed the servants, and third, that a violent wind had destroyed the home where all Job's children were feasting and killed them all.

At this point, Job's massive hedge of blessing has been removed, wiped out. He is at that point where the accuser told God that Job would curse Him. But Job doesn't do that:

*At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said,
"Naked I came from my mother's womb
And naked I will depart.
Yahweh gave and Yahweh has taken away
May the name of Yahweh be praised." (1:20,21)*

Again, Satan appears along with the angels and presents himself to Yahweh. The LORD reminds Satan that Job has maintained his integrity despite being ruined without any justice, without any reason. Satan's reply is that a man will give all he has for his own life -- that if Job is forced to endure physical suffering, he will curse God to His face.

Satan goes out from there and afflicts Job with painful boils and the second chapter ends with Job sitting among the ashes, scraping his skin with a piece of broken pottery. And even though his wife urges him to "Curse God and die!", he humbly replies that that's foolish talk, that as they accepted good from God, they should also accept trouble.

The three friends who will act as the voice of theological wisdom throughout the next 30 chapters then arrived and, when they saw him, they just started sobbing and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads -- they could barely recognize their friend. These were real friends. The verse that ends chapter 2 says this:

Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was. (2:13)

Then Job starts in with his complaint and he begins by cursing the day of his birth ... “*Why did I not perish at birth and die as I came from the womb?*” (3:11) That’s the question of a man who has found the bottom. How do you respond to a question like that? How do you answer a person who has lost all hope, all his reason for being? Eliphaz is the first of the friends to speak, and he decides to answer it theologically:

Consider now: who, being innocent, has ever perished?

Where were the upright ever destroyed?

As I have observed, those who plow evil

and those who sow trouble, reap it (4:7,8)

Eliphaz is falling into the classic Israelite way of thinking about suffering. It’s not God’s fault, so it must be yours, Job. God is just; it’s you that is unjust - you’re just blind to your own failings. But this approach leaves out that third part of the equation. There is an accuser, a source of evil that is an enemy of the human race, and he clearly has an influence on the course of events in this book.

Eliphaz preaches on for two chapters and Job responds:

Do you mean to correct what I say,

and treat the words of a despairing man as wind?

Relent, do not be unjust; reconsider, for my integrity is at stake.

Is there any wickedness on my lips? (6:26,29, 30)

Then he turns his attention back to God and complains that he is being pushed beyond his limits:

Will you never look away from me, or let me alone even for an instant?

If I have sinned, what have I done to you, O watcher of men?

Why have you made me your target? Have I become a burden to you?

(7:19,20)

Bildad speaks next -- the shortest man in the Bible, by the way; Bildad the Shuhite:

Does God pervert justice? Does the Almighty pervert what is right? (and later)

Surely God does not reject a blameless man. (8:3,20)

Again, Job replies:

Indeed, I know that this is true. But how can a mortal be righteous before God?

Though one wished to dispute with him, he could not answer him one time out of a thousand.

Though I were innocent, I could not answer him;

I could only plead with my judge for mercy. (9:2,19)

And from there, he again takes his case to God and makes his defense and asks his unanswerable questions, to God.

Zophar the Naamathite is the third friend, and his speech comes next and he pleads

with Job to put away sin and to seek after God. But Job counters that the tents of marauders are undisturbed and people who carry their hand-made gods are secure. "I know all the stuff you're telling me, but it's not helping, because it's not the whole truth." That's not a quote, but a kind of summary. And then, once more, Job turns towards God and asks his deep and heartfelt questions.

Eliphaz and Bildad each make two more speeches, much like their first attempts, and Zophar makes only one more. After each speech, Job responds, and it is often with frustration and growing impatience. In chapter 16:2,3

I have heard many things like these; miserable comforters are you all! Will your long-winded speeches never end?

And in chapter 19:2

How long will you torment me and crush me with words?

And then, later in chapter 19, there is this breakthrough of powerful faith and conviction that seems to come out of nowhere:

Have pity on me, my friends, have pity, for the hand of God has struck me.

Why do you pursue me as God does?

*... Oh that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll,
That they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead, or engraved in rock forever!
I know that my Redeemer lives and that in the end He will stand upon the earth,
And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God.*

I myself will see Him with my own eyes -- I, and not another.

How my heart yearns within me. (21-27)

And, after all the speeches and all the arguments and all the frustration ... when the court of human opinion has said all it has to say, Yahweh speaks to Job.

Who is this that darkens My counsel with words without knowledge?

Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell Me, if you understand.

Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!

Who stretched a measuring line across it?

On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone

-- while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?

(38:2-7)

And God goes on to question Job about what he knows for two full chapters, then concludes:

Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him?

Let him who accuses God answer Him!" (40:2)

And Job has no more questions ... and still no answers:

I am unworthy -- how can I reply to You? I put my hand over my mouth.

I spoke once, but I have no answer -- twice, but I will say no more. (40:4,5)

God is not finished. He asks an important question (40:8):

Would you discredit My justice? Would you condemn Me to justify yourself?

And then two more chapters in which God speaks of His strength and that of His

creation. He never answers Job's complaints, nor does He give Job a reason for his suffering. God doesn't tell Job what he doesn't need to know, but still, Job is satisfied. The final chapter begins (42:1-6):

Then Job replied to the LORD:

*I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.
You asked, "Who is this that obscures My counsel without knowledge?"
Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me to know
You said, "Listen now, and I will speak;
I will question you and you shall answer Me."
My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you.
Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.*

The book ends with two important scenes. In the first, God asks Job to intercede for his three friends because they had not spoken the truth about God. *"My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has."* (42:8).

The final scene comes right after God has accepted Job's prayer on behalf of his friends. God restores to Job double of all he had lost, except for the number of children. He is given 7 sons and 3 daughters, the same number as those he lost ... and he is given 140 years in which to enjoy his children and grandchildren to the fourth generation.

Now, what do we learn from this book of Hebrew wisdom?

I have to tell you that I love this book. I love reading it, I love thinking about it, I love what it tells us about God and about who we are in relation to Him. Here are some lessons:

1. Never put God in a box. We have a lot of theology in the world today that sounds like the counsel of Job's friends. "God always acts in this way because ..." "If we have enough faith, God will always grant us our requests." Job teaches us to be humble in the face of unanswered questions, and to put our trust in God in the mystery of life.
2. You almost never walk with someone who is going through great pain without hearing them ask, "Where is God in this? What's He doing? Doesn't He hear our prayers and why isn't He answering?" Remember that Job didn't get an answer, but ... he was totally satisfied once he had met God. His questions rolled off the table and onto the floor and were swept up and discarded, because, despite what he thought at the time, Job didn't need answers; he needed God. Once he had what he needed, he no longer asked for insight or justice or death. When you go through trials, and we all hit them, do remember this truth from Job: God is what you really need so seek His presence, study His word, trust His grace.
3. Third application: be careful when you're counseling someone who is grieving some kind, any kind, of loss, that you don't try so hard to protect God from the

person's blame or anger or fear or frustration, that you fail to tell the truth about Him. We're often expected to have answers that we actually don't have -- don't start making stuff up because someone wants you to explain their pain. Say what you know is true, say what remains a mystery to you, and then leave it there. Job's friends were in trouble with Yahweh because they went beyond what was true of Him.

4. God loves righteousness. He was so proud of Job that he boasted about him in front of Satan. Job did so many things well -- read chapter 31 if you want another list of good things, godly choices, that Job made a part of his life. We don't earn salvation by making godly choices, but we do honor God and we do receive blessing in our lives by choosing well. We bless our children when they are brought up in a godly home. We bless our neighbors and friends through wise choices. We leave a legacy that can inspire others to live well when we make a point of living righteously.