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(Revised Schedule)

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BAPTISTWAY PRESS® Adult Online Bible Commentary

By Dr. Jim Denison, Pastor, Park Cities Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas

Studies in Job: Dealing with Hard Times

Lesson One

When Bad Things Happen to a Good Person

Focal Text

Job 1:1; 1:6–2:10

Background

Job 1:1–2:10

Main Idea

Job's suffering was not what would have been expected to happen to a person who was righteous.

Question to Explore

Does righteous living provide insurance against bad things happening to us?

Quick Read

We can trust God even when we do not understand him.

Commentary

Hurricane season begins on June 1 and does not conclude until November 30. As I write, there is much pessimism in the news regarding the ability of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast to sustain another Katrina. College graduations have just been completed, with Virginia Tech and security issues on the minds of all who attended. England's Tony Blair will step down in June amid ongoing controversy over the conflict in Iraq and the war on terror. My elderly professor was right to say, "Be kind to everyone, because everyone's having a hard time."

Where is the issue of innocent suffering personal for you and your class this week? What unexplained pain is challenging your faith? How can you help those who face such perplexity and frustration? Of all the perennial issues that teachers of Scripture must address, this is the most frequent and urgent.

This week we begin a study of the Book of Job. We cannot avoid the theological challenges inherent in this debate between God and Satan, Job and his "friends," and Job

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with God. Somewhere along the way, we will each find our questions expressed in this complex literary masterpiece. Too, we will need the answers given by God's word and God's provision of hope.

Explore the issue of suffering

In theological language, we are dealing with the issue of *theodicy* (from Greek words for God—*theos*, and justice—*dikē*). The word *theodicy* was coined by the philosopher Wilhelm Leibniz in 1710. He defined his term, “The question of the compatibility of metaphysical, physical, and moral evil in the present world order with the justice and absolute power of God” (Leibniz, *Theodicee*, my translation).

The Bible is willing to ask Leibniz's question of its Author. Habakkuk complained to the God who allowed the devastation of his people at the hands of the Babylonians: “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?” (Habakkuk 1:13). Jesus cried from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

The medieval theologian Boethius provided the classic expression of our problem: “If God exists, from whence comes evil?” The pessimistic philosopher Schopenhauer spoke for many: “The shortness of life, so often lamented, may perhaps be the very best thing about it.”

Christians are especially susceptible to this issue, because we believe three apparently contradictory facts to be equally true:

- God is all-loving.
- God is all-powerful.
- Evil exists.

As the Stoic philosopher Epicurus observed, the solutions to this dilemma are four:

- God wants to remove evil but is unable.
- God is able but unwilling.
- God is both able and willing. Why doesn't he?
- God is neither able nor willing.

Can we defend the third approach with intellectual honesty? If so, how?

Popular but wrong approaches

The easiest way to attempt to “solve” the problem of evil and suffering is to deny or minimize one of its three conditions. Regarding the love of God, we can agree with the ancient Stoics that everything is fated by God. They claimed that we are all dogs tied to carts. We can trot alongside the cart, or be dragged by it, but we're going with the cart.

The ancient Greeks saw their gods as capricious and immoral, with Zeus throwing lightning bolts at those who displeased him. A common secular viewpoint today is that life is random coincidence, that if there is a God he has little interest in us. He is a clockmaker, watching his creation wind down.

We can also deny or minimize the power of God. Dualism argues that evil is coequal with good. From ancient Zoroastrianism to today, it has been popular to see God and Satan, good and evil, locked in a battle for supremacy. J. S. Mill asserted that God is limited in his power. So God loves us but cannot do everything he would wish to help us. Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his kind and sympathetic bestseller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, agreed that even God is not able to do everything he wants to do.

A third wrong approach is to minimize the nature or existence of evil. The Hindu tradition views evil as *maya*, illusion. The ancient Greeks saw evil as the product of the material world, to be escaped through ascetic discipline and philosophical reflection. The Buddhist worldview treats evil as the product of wrong desires. Hinduism likewise believes that suffering results from wrong choices, and so suffering is the *karma* we deserve.

One other wrong “solution” is to deny the existence of God altogether. David Hume, the eighteenth-century “father of skepticism,” proposed this syllogism:

- If God exists, he must be loving and powerful and thus eradicate evil.
- Evil exists.
- Therefore God does not exist.

While *atheism* says there is no God, *agnosticism* (from the Greek *gnosis*, meaning *knowledge*, and combined with *a*, meaning *no*) asserts that we cannot know whether God exists. Alternately, the “soft” agnostic admits simply that he or she does not (or cannot) know, without claiming that such knowledge is impossible for us all. The existence of evil and suffering has perhaps motivated more people to question or reject the existence of God than any other factor.

Biblical approaches

Since theodicy is a problem as old as the Garden of Eden and the flood of Noah, Christian theologians have wrestled with it all through the history of our faith. Five basic approaches have been proposed most often.

One: the spiritual warfare model. Satan is very real, acting as the chief catalyst of the suffering Job will experience in our text. Satan murders and lies (John 8:44). He accuses the people of God (Job 1:9-11), resists the godly (Zechariah 3:1-2; Matthew 13:38-39), and tempts us to sin (1 Chronicles 21:1; Matt. 4:1). He has power over unbelievers (Acts 26:18; 2 Corinthians 4:3-4). He is a “roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

As a result, much of the evil and suffering in the world is attributable to Satan's malignant work. Paul was clear: "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12).

However, not all suffering is the direct result of Satan's work. We live in a fallen world, in which natural disasters and disease are inevitable. People misuse their free will (see the second approach below). God permits some suffering for our greater good (see the third approach). Satan would like us to attribute all evil to him, giving him too much power; or blame nothing on him, pretending he doesn't exist. The right approach is to ask the Lord whether there is a Satanic component to our suffering, and trust that the Lord will guide us to the truth. If we are under attack, we can claim the power of God over our enemy and find victory in his Spirit and strength.

Two: the free-will theodicy. Augustine (A.D. 354-430) is usually considered the greatest Christian theologian after Paul. His approach to the problem of evil and suffering can be summarized as follows:

- God created all that is.
- All God created is good.
- Before the fall, evil was therefore "non-being," potential to be chosen but not yet reality.
- God created humanity with freedom of will.
- We used this freedom to choose evil.
- Our choice brought evil into existence, thus absolving God of blame.

Much in Scripture commends Augustine's approach. God gave us freedom of will (Genesis 3:15-17; Exodus 32:26; Deuteronomy 30:19; Joshua 24:15; 1 Kings 18:21). We were given this freedom so we could choose God and good (Matt. 4:10; Proverbs 1:10; 4:14; Romans 6:13; Eph. 6:13; 2 Peter 3:17). Our free choice for wrong led to evil (James 1:13-15; 4:1). All people are now sinners (Rom. 3:23). Our sin has resulted in a fallen world (Gen. 3:17; Rom. 8:22).

In an Old Testament sense, this view can be related to what is called *deuteronomical theology*: good is rewarded and evil is punished. Job's friends espoused this theodicy, confused that Job did not readily see the wisdom of this "answer" to his suffering.

Whenever evil is the product of our sinful choices, this approach explains its existence without blaming God. However, it does not account adequately for innocent suffering. Augustine would argue (correctly) that Katrina was the product of a world that "fell" because of sin. But he could not explain why it would devastate New Orleans rather than some other port city, or why so many innocent people would be affected. A philosopher will also ask, *If people were created good by nature, why did they choose to sin? If God gave us freedom of will and knew how we would choose to use it, is he not responsible for its use (at least to some degree)?*

The free-will approach helps us understand why a person who chooses to abuse alcohol might die in a drunk driving accident. But it doesn't explain why the innocent driver of the other car would die as well.

Three: the soul-building model. Irenaeus (about AD 120 to about 200) proposed an alternative approach to our problem:

- God created us to develop into perfect relationship with himself.
- He created the world as a place for that development.
- Evil is thus necessary as a means of our spiritual development (“soul-building”).

The Bible does teach that some suffering comes from God (Deut. 8:5; Job 16:12; Psalm 66:11; 90:7). We know that suffering can lead to good (Job 23:10; Ps. 119:67; 2 Cor. 4:17; Hebrews 12:11; Revelation 7:14). Suffering can lead us to repentance (Jeremiah 7:3, 5, 7), and can refine us (Ps. 66:10; Isaiah 48:10; Malachi 3:3; 1 Pet. 1:7; 4:17). Pain enables us to witness to our faith in God despite the hurt (2 Pet. 2:12, 15; 3:15-16). So God promises to use even difficult experiences for our good, to make us more like Jesus (Rom. 8:28-29).

Irenaeus explained how evil could exist before Adam and Eve chose it. His approach also affirmed the hope that God can redeem any suffering for his glory and our good. Problems with this approach include the fact that the “fall” it pictures is not as catastrophic as the event described in Genesis 3. The amount of evil in the world seems disproportionate to the present good. For example, it is hard to argue that the lessening of anti-Semitism that resulted from the Holocaust justifies the horrors of that tragedy. This approach also struggles with the existence of Hell, since it is not a soul-building or redemptive reality.

Four: the eschatological model. *Eschatology* deals with the future. Applied to theodicy, this approach asserts that evil will be resolved in the future, making present suffering endurable and worthwhile. Jesus promised that life leads to life eternal in glory (John 14:1-6), a paradise beyond our imagination (Rev. 21:1-5). We need not consider the present sufferings worth comparing with the glory to be revealed (Rom. 8:18).

As a philosophical model, this approach offers the guarantee of absolute rational understanding. We do not comprehend the purpose of suffering now, but we will one day (1 Cor. 13:12). All our questions will be answered. All the reasons God has permitted suffering in our lives will be clarified. Our present faithfulness will be redeemed with future reward in glory (Rev. 2:10).

This approach does not offer explanation in the present, however. Too, some might wonder how this promise of future hope makes present courage possible.

Five: the existential model. The last model is more practical than theoretical: God suffers as we suffer, and gives us strength to withstand and even redeem our pain. The Bible affirms this assertion (2 Cor. 4:1, 16; Eph. 3:13; Heb. 12:5; Rev. 2:3). God walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death (Ps. 23:4). He weeps as we weep (John 11:35). Jesus experienced every temptation and pain we feel (Heb. 4:15). He is present with us now in the sufferings of life (Deut. 20:1; Ps. 34:18; Isa. 43:2; Daniel 3:24-25; 12:6-7; Acts 16:25-26).

Philosophically, this fourth approach is not a true theodicy. It offers no real explanation for the origin or existence of suffering. But it does provide the practical assurance that our Father walks with his children through the hardest places of life, and will never allow us to face more than he will give us the strength to bear (1 Cor. 10:13).

Meet Job

We will see something of each approach in the Book of Job. Satan's role is obvious and catastrophic, although it does not explain all of Job's suffering (consider the anguish caused by his wife and friends). Misused freedom does not explain Job's pain, but it does explain the suffering caused by his friends' misguided theology. Soul-building will result from Job's faithfulness. Future redemption eventually became a reality for Job and his family (see Job 42:12-17). Too, God's presence in the midst of Job's pain is obvious and sustaining (Job 42:1-6).

It would be hard to find a book of the Bible that is as complete or practical in addressing theodicy and each of its approaches. The Book of Job is part of wisdom literature, that subset of Scripture that intends to offer practical help for the challenges of daily life. Alongside the priestly and prophetic books with their guidance for worship and spiritual commitment, wisdom literature tells us how to live today. Wisdom literature is not speculative as much as it is practical.

The Book of Job centers on a character who likely predated the Hebrew race and faith. Job used the Jewish name for God (Yahweh or "the LORD") only once in all his discourses (Job 12:9). He never referred to Abraham, the patriarchs, or the law of Moses. He made no mention of the Promised Land or the covenant of God with the nation of Israel. The Sabaeans (Job 1:15) and Chaldeans (2:17) are likely references to peoples who thrived in the second millennium B.C.

However, the author who recorded Job's life and travails was clearly working within Jewish faith and tradition. He or she used Yahweh twenty-five times throughout the book's narratives. The author clearly employed a well-known historical figure from an earlier generation and crisis to address the perennial issue of innocent suffering in the nation. For people who were subject to slavery in Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon, and to the ongoing enmity of their neighbors, the Jews could well ask why God would permit their pain.

Deuteronomic wisdom was the conventional answer of their culture. Embodied by the “friends” of Job, it explained all suffering as punishment for sin. But what of innocent suffering? Why did an innocent nation have to endure four centuries in Egypt? Why did babies have to die at the hands of the cruel Assyrians and Babylonians? Rather than offering theological speculation, the author of the Book of Job tells a story. If you have ever suffered pain you did not cause, this story is yours today.

Trust what you do not understand

The Book of Job opens with a remarkable endorsement of its central character:

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 all the people of the East (Job 1:1-3).

Uz was located to the east of Israel, encompassing Edom to the south and Aram in the north. This region included the land of the Temanites (2:11), the Shuhites (2:11), the Naamathites (2:11), the Buzites (32:2), and the Sabeans (1:15) and Chaldeans (1:17). It was near the great Arabian Desert (1:19). Depending on its size, the area could encompass parts of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq today.

The name *Job* could mean *object of enmity* or *he who turns*, although its etymology is very uncertain. He was a real person, described in Ezekiel 14:14 as a righteous man and commended in James 5:11 for his perseverance. The text describes him as “blameless and upright.” The two terms go together in the Hebrew syntax, for they are two sides of the same character.

“Blameless” means *complete, mature, lacking nothing*, indicating that Job was a man of complete integrity and righteousness in personal character. “Upright” means *standing straight*, pointing to a person who is unwilling to compromise morally, someone who is always honest in his relations with others.

Job would later cite his integrity (Job 35:5-8), sexual faithfulness (35:9-12), fairness to his slaves (35:13-15), care for the poor and orphaned (31:16-23), compassion on his enemies (31:29-30), hospitality (31:32), and honesty before God (31:33-34). At the same time, “blameless” does not mean sinless. All of us have sinned and come short of God’s glory (Rom. 3:23; 1 John 1:8). Job was “blameless and upright” in that he sought to live by God’s law in every dimension of his life.

In addition, Job “feared God and shunned evil,” words that also go together in the original grammar. To “fear God” is *to reverence him, to respect him deeply*. To “shun evil” is *to avoid it every time, at all costs*. Job was a man of enormous integrity and spirituality, as our text will soon demonstrate.

Trust God when your world caves in

Job's material prosperity (Job 1:2-3) and personal spirituality (1:4-5) would give great warrant to deuteronomic theology: Job had been blessed because he was righteous. If he was no longer blessed, clearly he was no longer righteous.

Satan would probe this connection. As God held his heavenly council, with "the angels" present (1:6), we read that "Satan also came with them." "Satan" means *accuser* in the Hebrew. It is always found with the definite article in the Hebrew of the Book of Job: *the accuser*. (By 1 Chronicles 21:1, "Satan" had become a defined and personal name so that the definite article was no longer needed.)

The book nowhere speculates regarding the origin of Satan or the appropriateness of his presence in heaven. The "fall of Satan" is not as clear in Scripture as in Milton and conventional wisdom today. Isaiah 14:12-15 apparently referred to an earthly king, not a heavenly being (see Isa. 14:16-20). All we are told is that *the accuser* was in the presence of God, having returned from "roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it" (Job 1:7).

The Lord commended Job as the man of integrity and spirituality already described (1:1, 8). Satan's reply challenged everything God claimed for his servant and, by extension, the human race: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (1:9). Satan charged that Job was a man of integrity and spirituality only because he had been blessed materially, and as a means to the end of such prosperity. If God would separate prosperity and spirituality, he would quickly see that Job was not the person of integrity God claimed him to be.

Too, if Job, a person so special that "there is no one on earth like him" (1:8), was so self-centered in his spirituality, what of the rest of the race? God's design for humanity would be fatally flawed, his best followers the most materialistic and selfish. At risk was the very possibility that a person could relate to God without sin, pride, and greed.

So God allowed Satan to test his servant (1:12). Soon Job's oxen and donkeys were stolen by the Sabeans, the servants tending them killed (1:13-15). His sheep and servants were killed by fire from the sky (1:16), probably lightning strikes. His camels were stolen by the Chaldeans, again with Job's servants there being killed (1:17). Most devastating of all, a "mighty wind" from the Arabian Desert then killed all of Job's children (1:18-19). In a single day, "the greatest man among all the people of the East" (1:3) was reduced to horrific despair and poverty.

Suppose that your faith culture taught the theology that integrity is always rewarded while sin is always punished. Now imagine that your home, car, life's work, and children were all taken from you tomorrow. If such tragedy were in some way your fault, you would be no less devastated but at least your theological worldview would not be shaken to its foundations. In a matter of moments, though, the innocent Job was left destitute of his theology as well as of his possessions and loved ones.

Job's physical response was consistent with Oriental mourning: "Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head" (1:20a). But his spiritual response was unique and astounding: "Then he fell to the ground in worship" (1:20b). Admitting that he had nothing at birth and would have nothing at death (1:21a), he concluded:

The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;
may the name of the Lord be praised (1:21b).

Further, "In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing" (1:22). Satan's strategy failed. Despite the loss of his family and prosperity, Job would not curse the Lord. So far, his faith was not a means to his fortune or its result.

Trust God when your health is gone

But Satan wasn't done. When he next entered the council of heaven and was given God's good report about Job's faithfulness, he retorted: "stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face" (2:5). So God allowed the accuser to take Job's health and subject him to horrific physical torment.

The text does not name Job's disease (if it even had a medical name or description). We know that it caused him to endure "painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head" (2:7). These sores or boils would fester over his entire body (7:5). He would endure nightmares (7:14), scabs that became black (30:28, 30), a disfigured and revolting appearance (2:12; 19:20), bad breath (19:17), weight loss (17:7; 19:20), fever (30:30), and pain all day and night (30:17). Job's disease was clearly not natural in origin or in cure ("the Lord made him prosperous again," 42:10).

It is impossible for us to imagine Job's physical torment. His children and life's work gone, his health broken, it seemed that there was no hope for this man of God. So his wife counseled him: "Curse God and die!" (2:9). Leviticus 24:16 records God's response to such sin: "anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord must be put to death. The entire assembly must stone him. Whether an alien or native-born, when he blasphemes the Name, he must be put to death." Perhaps Job's wife expected God to strike him dead as God had apparently taken their children; or she may have expected the community to respond to such sin by ending Job's life. Either way, she thought he deserved to curse the Lord and that he deserved the fate that would result.

Try to envision Job's anguish. Everything was gone but his wife, and she wanted him dead! His reply is one of the classic faith confessions in all of Scripture: "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" With this result: "In all this, Job did not sin in what he said" (Job 2:10).

Job's faithfulness despite his innocent suffering proved that his integrity was not the result of his prosperity, or a means to it. He demonstrated that it was possible for a human

to be faithful to God in all circumstances. Satan's strategy foiled, he left the narrative and never reappeared. Although Job was in torment, he passed the test. So can we.

Conclusion

What are we to learn from Job's story to this point? Three truths apply to all who face innocent suffering. One: *there may be a reason for our pain that we do not comprehend*. Job had no idea that the real conflict was not between God and himself, but between God and Satan. He had no way to understand his part in their cosmic battle. His suffering had a reason, just not a reason he could see. So it may be with us all.

When we face suffering, it is good to step through the responses Scripture makes clear. *Is this spiritual warfare?* We can ask the Lord to show us if and how the enemy is at work, and how we are to respond. *Are we at fault?* The *free-will* theodicy does not explain all suffering, as Job's story and Jesus' crucifixion prove. But it is a good question to ask, to be sure that our sins are confessed and our hearts right with the Lord.

What are we to learn? The *soul-building* theodicy reminds us that God can use bad for good, as a means to the end of making us more like Jesus (Rom. 8:28-29). *How can God use this in the future?* We now look through a glass darkly, but one day face to face (1 Cor. 13:12). *Where is God in our pain?* Even when we don't understand God's ways, we can trust that God hurts as we hurt and will sustain us in the darkest days of life.

Pain often has no reasons in the present. Job could not see his part in a much larger drama. Neither can we. But our finite minds do not limit God's cosmic omniscience and providence.

Two: *present suffering can lead to future significance*. Job's present turmoil made possible God's remarkable blessing in his future life, and the eternal significance of his story for God's people. This member of ancient Near Eastern culture could not possibly know that you and I would be studying his story four millennia later, or that he would be a biblical example of perseverance for all time (see James 5:11). We cannot measure the future results of present obedience. But with Paul we can exclaim, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18).

Three: *it is possible to trust God when we cannot understand him*. When the darkest days come, Job proves that we can still turn to our Lord. When we want to argue with the Lord, we're invited to such honesty (Isa. 1:18). When we want to cry in anguish to a God who seems to have abandoned us, we're welcome to join Jesus in expressing our anguish forthrightly (Matt. 27:46; Ps. 22:1). Job would soon do this. But he never turned his back on the God who never turns his back on us. We can follow Job's example and find his faith, today.

Explosive Thinking

1. Name some people from your experience who might fit the description of being “blameless and upright.” What qualities of life did they exhibit to give them this characterization?

2. Where have you witnessed suffering in a way that caused you to wrestle with the problem of suffering in innocent people? What questions does this suffering raise in your mind? How have you seen people react to this kind of suffering?

3. Satan raised a question as to whether a person would serve God if he or she received no visible reward. What other basis for serving God is there? Have you seen evidence of selfless service? Why is it hard to serve God if there is no visible reward?

BAPTISTWAY PRESS® Adult Online Bible Commentary

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Studies in Job: Dealing with Hard Times

Lesson Two

The Agony of Why

Focal Text

Job 3

Background

Job 2:11–3:26

Main Idea

When people are in the depths of suffering, it is easy to be overcome by despair at what is happening and question why.

Question to Explore

When suffering comes, what will we do?

Quick Read

In the hardest places of life, God invites and redeems our honesty.

Commentary

Some questions are not worth the time it takes to ask them. For instance, a friend sent me these recently:

- Why is “abbreviate” such a long word?
- Why did kamikaze pilots wear helmets?
- How do they get deer to cross at “Deer Crossing” signs?
- Why do they call it “rush hour” when no one moves?
- Why do we park on a driveway and drive on a parking lot?

Other questions express the greatest and gravest issues of life.

- What suffering person has not wanted to cry to the Lord, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?” (Psalm 22:1; see Matthew 27:46).

- Jesus asked us, “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mark 8:36-37, KJV).
- Job needed to know, “If a man dies, will he live again?” (Job 14:14).
- Jesus’ question in Matthew 16:15 is the most significant of all: “Who do you say I am?”

This week we will explore the depth and emotion of suffering. Job’s response to horrific tragedy was recorded in Scripture because it is still relevant to our lives and pain today. We can learn from him how to be honest in the hard places of life, and how to ask questions that God’s word is ready to answer.

What would you like to ask the Lord today?

Be honest with your feelings (3:1-10)

When I became a Christian at the age of fifteen, I soon developed the erroneous idea that real believers don’t have doubts about their Lord. So, if we have enough faith, we’ll never struggle. The *health-and-wealth* gospel promotes the idea that prosperity is always God’s reward for faithfulness, suffering his punishment for faithlessness.

We’re not the first to think this way. The theology of Job’s world prescribed a similar worldview, that success and health meant one was righteousness and difficulties in life meant one had sinned. Job had lost his family, his possessions, and his livelihood. Therefore, it must be that he had sinned in some way against God. But Job knew that he had done nothing to deserve such tragedy. How would he respond to this theological and personal crisis? With the kind of honesty that God’s word commends to us today.

Job 3 is often considered one of the most depressing, discouraging chapters in all of God’s word. It begins, “After this” (Job 3:1), a reference to the tragedies of the first two chapters and the arrival of Job’s three friends (2:11-13). For seven days, these four men sat together in silence and mourning. Through it all, Job would not curse God (2:9-10). But he was willing to curse the day he was born (3:1).

“Curse” translates a Hebrew term meaning in this context *to view with contempt*. To treat the day of his birth with such malice was tantamount to cursing his life from its beginning to the present. All Job had accomplished and come to possess was now nothing. He looked back over his life with despair and hopelessness, for it was all gone.

So “he said” (3:2, the shortest verse in the Hebrew Bible), literally *Job answered and said* in the Hebrew. The expression does not imply previous speech but can mean *respond to an event* or *speak in view of an occasion*. Job’s *answer* to his crisis was honest and agonizing: “May the day of my birth perish, and the night it was said, ‘A boy is born!’” (3:3). The happiest day of his parents’ lives was now the saddest of Job’s. He would soon curse the day (3:4-5) and the night (3:6-7) of his own birth and life.

Job wished that the “day of my birth” would “perish,” literally *be destroyed*. “A boy is born” (3:3) is better rendered “A boy is *conceived*” (NASB, italics added for emphasis; see NRSV; see also 15:35, in which the same Hebrew word is used, “They conceive trouble and give birth to evil; their womb fashions deceit”). Job mourned his life from the moment of its conception to the present.

He wanted the day of his conception to “turn to darkness” in the sense that it never occurred (3:4). Job wished that God had not cared about that day or created it, that the sun had not come up on that morning. Instead, he consigned it to “deep shadow,” literally *darkness of death*, translated in Psalm 23:4 as the “shadow of death.”

After condemning the day of his conception, he then cursed the night of his birth (Job 3:6-7). He wished that it had never existed (3:6) but had been “barren” (3:7, literally *made of stone*; see Job 15:34) in the sense that it was childless with no “shout of joy” at a baby’s birth (3:7).

“Those who curse days” (3:8a) referred to professional prophets such as Balaam (see Numbers 22:5-6). Those who “rouse Leviathan” would be idolaters who worshiped such sea beasts, and perhaps a reference to the pagan legend that this beast would swallow the sun during an eclipse. In other words, Job was even calling on pagan priests and their pagan deities to condemn the day of his birth.

Job wished that the “morning stars” (such as Venus and Mercury) of his birth had been dark, with no daylight on that day (3:9). All this because that particular day did not keep him in the womb but allowed him to be born (3:10).

Only Jeremiah, the “weeping prophet,” could come close to such honesty and despair:

Cursed be the day I was born!
 May the day my mother bore me not be blessed!
Cursed be the man who brought my father the news,
 who made him very glad, saying,
 “A child is born to you—a son!”
May that man be like the towns
 the Lord overthrew without pity.
May he hear wailing in the morning,
 a battle cry at noon.
For he did not kill me in the womb,
 with my mother as my grave,
 her womb enlarged forever.
Why did I ever come out of the womb
 to see trouble and sorrow
 and to end my days in shame? (Jeremiah 20:14-18)

Both Job and Jeremiah prove that the Lord permits and even invites the honest expression of our emotions and pain. While the Stoic philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome exalted apathetic resignation, the Scriptures consistently call us to be human and real with our problems. “Jesus wept” is not just the shortest verse in the New Testament (John 11:35) but one of the most powerful. If the sinless, incarnate Son of God could be honest with his emotions, so can we.

Where has life fallen in on you or someone in your class this week? We are invited by the Lord to put our pain in words, to express honestly our frustration and despair. Buddhists have a wise saying: “The body weeps tears the eyes refuse to shed.” Stress caused by unexpressed emotions is damaging and even deadly.

God wants us to express honestly the emotions of our souls, remembering that he knows us better than we know ourselves. “Come now, let us reason together,” the NIV translates Isaiah 1:18. But the Hebrew can be translated literally, *Come, let us argue it out*. The only emotions God cannot redeem are those we will not admit.

Thomas Edison was one day told by two dejected assistants, “We’ve just completed our seven hundredth experiment and we still don’t have an answer. We have failed.” “No, my friends,” said Edison, “you haven’t failed. It’s just that we know more about this subject than anyone else alive. And now we’re closer to finding the answer, because now we know seven hundred things not to do. Don’t call it a mistake. Call it an education.”¹

The great inventor was able to encourage and inspire his associates, but only after they were honest with their frustrations and failures. So it is with our Father. He wants to help his children with their pain, but he can give only what we will receive. Healing starts with honesty.

Be honest with your questions (3:11-19)

Next Job turned from emotions to intellect. Five times he asked the Lord “why?” (3:11, 12, 16, 20, 23). The first three related to the fact of his birth, the last two to the fact of his suffering.

Job had cursed the day of his birth. Now he longed for the day of his death: “Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb?” (3:11). “Perish at birth” translates the literal Hebrew, *die in the womb*. If he had died at the moment of his birth, he would never have faced this tragedy. If he had not passed through his mother’s “knees” at his birth and been nursed at her “breasts,” he would not have survived (3:12). (Some suggest that the “knees” in question are to be identified with his father’s lap, as in Genesis 50:23, although the connection with his mother’s “breasts” seems clear.)

Then Job would have escaped his present turmoil. Verse 13 can be translated literally, *I would lie down, I would be at peace; I would be asleep; I would be at rest*. He thus would

be in the same position as “kings and counselors of the earth” (3:14) and “rulers who had gold” (3:15) who had died.

Now death seemed much preferable to life. If he had been “a stillborn child” (3:16), he would have no turmoil, only “rest” (3:17). He would have the ease of slaves freed from their slave drivers (3:18) and would dwell with “the small and the great” (3:19).

This section provides one of the few attractive descriptions of the afterlife in the Old Testament. Other references to death in Job picture the grave in a very different light: it is a place of no return (7:10; 10:21; 16:22); of gloom and deep darkness (10:21); of uncleanness (9:31), rottenness (13:28), and pain (14:20-22); a place of fire (31:12) lacking wisdom (28:20-22).²

Now Job turned from the misery of his birth to the tragedy of his life: “Why is light given to those in misery, and life to the bitter of soul”? (3:20). To be “bitter of soul” is a common experience in this fallen world. When a person longs for death, searches for it as “hidden treasure” (3:21), and rejoices (literally *rejoices with exceeding joy*) when it comes (3:22), why would not a good God permit such a person to die?

Never in the biblical narrative did Job actually attempt to end his life. The only times we find such extreme behavior in the Old Testament are in situations of military disaster as a means of avoiding a humiliating death (Saul, 1 Samuel 31:4-5; Ahithophel, 2 Samuel 17:23; Zimri, 1 Kings 16:18; Abimelech, Judges 9:54). In spite of his suffering, Job held tenaciously to the fact of his integrity; to kill himself would have been tantamount to admitting defeat.

Nonetheless, Job was “a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in” (Job 3:23). Satan complained that God had “put a hedge around” Job with protection (1:10); Job complained that God had “hedged” him with life. So Job *sighed* (the word suggests *racking sobs*) instead of eating, and “groans pour out” of his body “like water” (3:24).

His greatest fears had come to pass (3:25), a sentiment any bereaved parent can understand. He had “no peace, no quietness” and “no rest, but only turmoil” (3:26). The Hebrew can be rendered:

I cannot relax!
And I cannot settle!
And I cannot rest
And agitation keeps coming back!³

In no area of his life could he find contentment or hope.

Who hasn't been in a place without hope? Who won't be there again? In such a place, the Lord invites us to ask our questions and express our doubts.

If you could ask the Father just one question today, what would it be? What questions does your class need freedom and encouragement to ask this week?

Conclusion

Was Job justified in expressing such grief and frustration? Do you think Job's example is included in Scripture so we might emulate him, or so we might be warned to reject his model?

I cannot speak for you or dictate the way the Spirit might lead you to approach and teach this text. Were I teaching Job 3 this week, I would offer it as an example of honesty redeemed. A disease must be diagnosed before it can be cured. Honesty is the first step to resolving any conflict, whether the conflict is between us and others or us and God.

But once we have expressed our doubts and pain to God, we must give our anger to him and trust his transforming grace. It is always too soon to give up on God's power and purpose for our lives. As God used Job's suffering and rewarded his faithfulness, so he redeems all he permits or causes today.

Our choice is between the kind of faith that never risks and never suffers, and the kind of faith that questions until it finds answers and peace. When our reach exceeds our grasp, there will be days of disappointment and despair. But bringing our honest feelings and questions to God is the only way to grow stronger in faith and commitment. Take the risk of trusting God, wherever he leads, whatever he asks, whatever the cost. Know that you cannot predict the future significance of present obedience.

Theodore Roosevelt's words still stir my soul:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.⁴

Do you agree?

¹ Ted W. Engstrom, *The Pursuit of Excellence* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1982) 35-36.

² Ralph L. Smith, *Job: A Study in Providence and Faith* (Nashville, Tennessee: Convention Press, 1971), 35.

³ Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1976), 110.

⁴ Theodore Roosevelt, "The Man in the Arena: Citizenship in a Republic," address delivered at the Sorbonne, Paris, April 23, 1910. See www.theodoreroosevelt.org/research/speech%20arena.htm.

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Explosive Thinking

1. Think about the most agonizing suffering you have witnessed a person endure. What emotions can you identify in such suffering?
2. Which of these emotions do you see in Job's lament?
3. How do you envision God's response to Job's outburst?
4. What does the response of Job's friends say about reaching out to our friends who experience anguish?

5. What words of comfort have been spoken to you in a time of pain? Do you have a favorite scripture that speaks to you in times of pain?

BAPTISTWAY PRESS® Adult Online Bible Commentary

By Dr. Jim Denison, Pastor, Park Cities Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas

Studies in Job: Dealing with Hard Times

Lesson Three

Helpers Who Are No Help

Focal Text

Job 4:1-9; 8:1-6; 11:1-6, 13-15

Background

Job 2:11-13; 4:1–11:20

Main Idea

Would-be helpers whose main intent is to defend their ideas about God provide little help to hurting people.

Question to Explore

What happens when would-be helpers are more interested in defending their ideas about God than in helping people?

Quick Read

Human presence and divine wisdom are gifts to hurting souls.

Commentary

Economist John Kenneth Galbraith coined the term “conventional wisdom” in 1958 to describe ideas that typically are accepted as true by the public. There was a time when “everybody knew” that the earth was flat. Heavier-than-air flying machines were long thought to be impossible. Too, there was a day when everyone knew that all suffering was caused by sin.

In this week’s study of Job, we’ll encounter three theologians who had three explanations for this man’s horrific tragedy. Job’s “friends” are classic figures in biblical literature because their ideas are as current today as when they were first delivered to this beleaguered man. Their “wisdom” is to be found in sermons and advice given the world over. Let’s learn to separate the wheat from the chaff, the true from the false. Too, let’s learn how to be true friends when suffering people need us most.

Are you in need of God's help for your pain? Do you know someone who needs your compassion and your Father's word this week? Here are three theological statements of conventional wisdom, each damaging to our souls. Let's learn to avoid them and to share God's truth in love.

All suffering is your fault (4:1-9)

Our dialogue begins:

When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. 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 (Job 2:11-13).

"Job's three friends" is better translated, *three of Job's friends* (2:11). Of all those who knew this tortured soul, once "the greatest man among all the people of the East" (1:3), only these three came to console him.

The first was named Eliphaz the Temanite. Teman was a city in Edom, southeast of the Dead Sea, so that this man likely traveled more than a hundred miles to console his friend. The second was Bildad the Shuhite. Shuah was a son of Abraham by Keturah (Genesis 25:2), but the name is otherwise unknown. The third was Zophar the Naamathite. The names Bildad and Zophar are found nowhere else in Scripture than in Book of Job.

Share the suffering of your friends

These three men made a personal sacrifice of time and travel to be with their friend. When they saw him "they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads" (Job 2:12). These were typical signs of mourning in the ancient Middle East, indicative of their deep and personal compassion for Job. Together they sat silently on the ground for seven days and nights. So far, so good.

But then "Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth" (3:1). He made clear that "God has hedged in" his life and soul (3:23) through no fault of his own. Such a claim of innocent suffering flew in the face of the accepted theological truth of the day: the just are rewarded, and the wicked are punished. Since Job was suffering, he must have sinned. The sooner he faced this fact and repented of his transgressions, the sooner he could be forgiven and healed by God. To his three friends, Job was a sinner in denial, much like an alcoholic who will not admit his addiction. *Tough love* would be necessary.

Job's "friends" were about to give some of the worst advice in all of God's word. The fact that their words are recorded in Scripture does not make them right. Much of the Bible is descriptive rather than prescriptive. For instance, David's sin with Bathsheba is documented, not so we will follow his example but so that we won't. God's word accurately transmits these speeches—not because they are true, but because they are not.

That said, we should not overlook the fact that Job's friends cared deeply for him. They did not have to travel to be with him, or spend the week sharing his suffering. They could have allowed him to claim his innocence without responding to his (perceived) faults. They spoke in concern, but they did not speak the truth.

Job 3—31 contains their speeches and Job's responses. Each will speak, then Job will reply, until two full rounds and part of a third are completed. The speeches of a fourth friend (Job 32—37) are similar in content and conviction.

Seek divine wisdom, not human

Eliphaz the Temanite replied first. He began in complimentary fashion, applauding the ways Job had "instructed many" and "strengthened feeble hands" by his wisdom in the past (3:3). "Many" points to the significance and reach of Job's reputation and social standing. "Many," "feeble hands," "those who stumbled," and "faltering knees" may indicate a progression from those who simply need advice to those whose hands shake in fear or weakness, those who stumble in life and practice, and finally those who have fallen to the ground in failure. Words of truth and encouragement can indeed transform hurting souls. Now Eliphaz hoped to do the same for Job.

Eliphaz got quickly to the point of his theological argument: "now trouble comes to you, and you are discouraged; it strikes you, and you are dismayed. Should not your piety be your confidence and your blameless ways your hope?" (4:5-6). If Job were as innocent as he claimed to be, he should assume that God would right these wrongs and redeem his faith. Given the *deuteronomic wisdom* that equated conduct with circumstances, it would be impossible for Job's tragedies to continue much longer. God *must* come to his aid. The Lord *must* reward his innocence.

Yet Job had cursed the day of his birth and mourned in soulful agony the tragedies that had befallen him. He had given no indication he expected good to come to him ever again. Surely such reaction indicated that this man knew in his heart that his suffering was his fault.

So Eliphaz asked him, "Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed?" (4:7). He called on personal experience: "As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it. At the breath of God they are destroyed; at the blast of his anger they perish" (4:8). Job's abandonment of hope, coupled with the consistent fact that "those who sow trouble reap it," made the case. So all suffering is our fault, even when we are as righteous as Job.

Our minds quickly jump to biblical examples that give the lie to such a conclusion. We think first of the innocent death of the Lord Jesus, “one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). We think of the innocent babies slaughtered by Herod (Matthew 2:16-18) and the martyrdoms of Jesus’ apostles. Stepping back further into biblical history, we consider Joseph’s unfair imprisonment (Gen. 39:1) and Daniel in the lion’s den (Daniel 6). But to be fair to Eliphaz, it is likely that he lived before any of these events occurred.

It is possible that Eliphaz had not yet witnessed innocent suffering and that much of his observed experiences supported his theological conclusion. A lazy farmer does indeed struggle while one who is industrious is typically rewarded. Drunkenness often leads to misery and disease while a healthy lifestyle is usually beneficial.

But even granting Eliphaz his chronological place in biblical history, we must quickly criticize his theological method. He built his entire argument on his own experience. “As I have observed” is a terrible way to begin a spiritual investigation. If we offer others only our own advice and experience, we are paupers trading with paupers. Pooled ignorance is still ignorance.

Far better to pray first, seeking the wisdom and counsel of God. Far better to consult Scripture and share compassion rather than criticism. Far better to be a friend than a superior. The tragedy of Eliphaz is repeated every time we consider ourselves better than those who are hurting, as though we somehow deserve our status and they deserve theirs. Only when I have hurt as you hurt do I have any right to share my experience with you. Even then, we must judge all I say by the word and wisdom of the Lord.

On the merits, Eliphaz’s argument is tragically flawed. There is much innocent pain in the world. To blame those who suffer only magnifies their pain. Eliphaz was doing well until he began talking, a lesson we can all learn today.

Cease to sin and you’ll cease to suffer (8:1-6)

What was Job to do about his pain? Eliphaz had diagnosed the disease according to the conventional wisdom of the day. Now Job’s second friend, Bildad the Shuhite, added his “wisdom.” Job concluded his response to Eliphaz’s indictment by challenging God: “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?” (Job 7:20). Bildad quickly described this protest of innocence as “a blustering wind” (8:2).

Then Bildad came to the defense of the Lord: “Does God pervert justice? Does the Almighty pervert what is right?” (8:3). If we are choosing between Job’s character and that of God, there is no choice. So far, so good.

But then Bildad made a horrific application of his thesis: “When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin” (8:4). Imagine telling a

grieving father that his children's deaths were somehow their fault. It is difficult to find more callous words in all of Scripture, however well-intentioned they might have been. In Bildad's mind, if Job would not admit his own sin, he must at least admit that of his children, given their tragic deaths.

However, nothing in Job 1 indicates that these children were in any way to blame for their fate. Satan registered no accusation against them. Too, Job interceded with God for their supposed sins: "When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would send and have them purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, 'Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.' This was Job's regular custom" (1:5). He did not know that they had sinned but merely wanted to be preventative as their spiritual leader. At no time does the text link his children's behavior to their deaths.

Bildad made this point to reinforce the deuteronomic theology he and his friends were insisting on. He did it also to warn Job before it was too late: "if you will look to God and plead with the Almighty, if you are pure and upright, even now he will rouse himself on your behalf and restore you to your rightful place" (8:5-6). "Plead" comes from the Hebrew root for *grace*; here it means to *seek grace* and forgiveness from God. In addition, Job must be "pure" or righteous in thought and attitude, and "upright" in conduct (8:6). If he would meet these conditions, God would forgive and restore him.

Here we find the corollary to our first false conclusion: since suffering is always our fault, if we will cease to sin we will cease to suffer. Buddhists typically attribute suffering to wrong desires. Hindus often blame suffering on *karma*, the consequences of previous actions. Muslims usually view suffering as Allah's punishment on transgressors. In each tradition, the idea is that if we will change our ways we will change our circumstances.

Once again, we can see how a person in antiquity could come to this observed conclusion. A fisherman who works harder today than yesterday catches more fish. A businessperson who asks forgiveness for previous thefts and exhibits integrity over time is often forgiven by people. But applying such a conclusion to our relationship with God is nowhere warranted by Scripture. Jesus found strength in Gethsemane not by repenting but by continued faith. Paul experienced far greater tribulation after trusting Christ than when he was persecuting Christians. John the Apostle was persecuted on Patmos despite his commitment to his Lord.

If Bildad had offered encouragement and compassion rather than uninformed theology, he would have been a model of caring ministry. As it is, he shows us how not to help those who face the hardships of life.

You deserve worse than you've received (11:1-6, 13-15)

One more friend warrants notice in our study. Job had responded to Bildad's wisdom with continued complaint that he had been persecuted unfairly (Job 10). Apparently Job

silenced both Bildad and Eliphaz, for Zophar the Naamathite then upbraided his friends: “Are all these words to go unanswered? Is this talker to be vindicated?” (11:2).

Then Zophar chastised Job directly: “Will your idle talk reduce men to silence? Will no one rebuke you when you mock?” (11:3). He wished that God would confront this man for his obvious transgressions (11:5), a hope that would soon come true (Job 38—41). In the meanwhile, Zophar was convinced that “God has even forgotten some of your sin” (11:6).

Here we find another theological assertion to lay alongside the first two. First, all suffering is our fault, for God must always act justly. Second, if we cease to sin, we cease to suffer, for the Lord is also a God of grace. Third, God proves it by the fact that he does not judge us as far as our sins deserve. As bad as things had been for Job, they could in fact have been worse. His continued refusal to confess his transgressions taunted the grace and justice of God and could well lead to further judgment.

Zophar actually spoke biblical truth: God “does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities” (Psalm 103:10). If he did, we would be ticketed every time we speed or caught every time we lie. Our every sinful thought would be exposed. If God were fair, none of us could stand his justice for a moment.

But the conclusion of Zophar’s argument was as flawed as that of his associates: “Yet if you devote your heart to him and stretch out your hands to him, if you put away the sin that is in your hand and allow no evil to dwell in your tent, then you will lift up your face without shame; you will stand firm and without fear” (11:13-15). If Job would only repent, he would be restored and would no longer suffer. Scores of biblical martyrs prove the fallacy of such theology. For instance, remember John’s vision of heaven and “the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained” (Revelation 6:9). Millions of martyred Christians are evidence that suffering is often the result of obedience.

Conclusion

So what positive lessons are we to learn from Job’s three “friends”? First, *compassionate presence is vital to true ministry*. We are the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27), his “ambassadors” and representatives (2 Corinthians 5:20). The three friends did well to hasten to Job’s side and sit with him in his grief. Our presence is often our most powerful witness and help.

When my father died, a dear friend drove across Houston the next day to sit with me. I don’t remember anything he said or even whether he said anything at all. But I will never forget the fact that he was with me. You probably have similar memories of friends whose presence mediated the presence and grace of the Lord. You don’t have to know what to say. In fact, it’s best if you don’t.

Second, *only God's word can change human hearts*. Human wisdom, however well-intentioned and true from personal observation, has no power to change the soul. Only God's Spirit, using God's word, can mediate God's transforming grace. So pray before you go to help a friend who is suffering and as you are present. Look for biblical truth to share in humility and compassion. Trust that the Lord will never allow his word to return void (Isaiah 55:11). Too, know that the Lord will use your words to share his word in love.

Third, *never give up on God*. Despite the suffering your friend may be facing, it's always too soon to assume that God will not intervene. It will take several more chapters, but eventually the Lord will speak to Job and heal his pain. God never works ahead of schedule, but never behind. Keep trusting the Lord to do the right thing, for he will.

Colonel Laird Gunnert was a POW in Vietnam, beaten and tortured mercilessly. Between interrogations, he was forced to kneel for hours at a time. One day, Gunnert's Vietcong captors took him to an interrogation room he had not seen before. This time his beating was especially severe. He crumpled to the floor in a broken heap and lay there in excruciating pain, too exhausted and battered to lift his face from the dirt floor.

Opening his eyes, Colonel Gunnert saw something on the wall, about four inches from the floor, right in front of his face. As his eyes focused, he saw that someone had scrawled in the dirt and mud, "Keep the faith, baby!" Then the Colonel knew he was not alone, and that faith was enough. It was.

Who needs to keep the faith in your class this week?

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5. What does Bildad say God will do for Job if he is upright and pure?

7. What do you think is Bildad's point?

8. Chapter 11 is Zophar's observations. What does Zophar suggest Job do in verse 13?

9. What should Job do according to Zophar?

10. How would you describe Zophar's point of view?

Explosive Thinking

1. Job's friends begin with silence but then they speak. Why do you think we are tempted to express our observations to people who are suffering?

2. Describe a time when silence would have been better than a person's words in your time of suffering or trouble.

3. Job's friends believed there had to be a cause for Job's suffering. It had to be Job's sin that has caused this terrible situation. How would you respond to Job's friends and their assumption?

BAPTISTWAY PRESS® Adult Online Bible Commentary

By Dr. Jim Denison, Pastor, Park Cities Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas

Studies in Job: Dealing with Hard Times

Lesson Four

Longing for Help

Focal Text

Job 16:1-8, 18-21; 19:1-7, 23-27

Background

Job 16–17; 19

Main Idea

When human comforters fail and God seems distant and even against us, we can still trust in God.

Question to Explore

What can we do when it seems we have been left alone and uncared for in our suffering?

Quick Read

It is always too soon to give up on God.

Commentary

Each semester I taught philosophy of religion at Southwestern Seminary, we focused on the problem of evil and suffering. I would always present the idea that God is with us in suffering and wants to redeem it for an even greater good. Then I would ask the class for examples of ways God had been with them in hard places and had used these experiences. Typically students would talk about times when they lost a job, or their marriage had difficulties, or their money ran short.

One semester, after several had talked about such problems, a man sitting on the front row stood. He told us about the year during which, at separate times, his wife and several of his children died. We were all stunned. I asked him how he got through it. He said, “I had a pastor. And every day my pastor called and said, ‘God is still on his throne.’” Then he turned and faced the class, tears running down his face. He said, “God is still on his throne.”

He is indeed.

This week we'll watch Job confront his friends/accusers. We'll listen as he grapples with the pain of his tragic loss and the inadequate theology of his culture. We'll join him in seeking to make sense of suffering. We'll learn that no matter how harsh our hurt or bitter our questions, our Father is still the Lord of the universe.

At the end of our study, the relevant question will not be whether God is on his throne. The question will be whether God is on yours.

Be honest about hard times

Job had lost his family, his health, his estate, his social status. In a society that equated all suffering with sin, he had lost his reputation and integrity in the eyes of his peers. His friends came to share his grief, but they felt compelled to correct him when he proclaimed his innocence. Last week we listened as they blamed him for his problems. This week we'll watch as he blames them for the suffering their charges inflicted on him, and as he blames God for allowing it all.

Job has heard "many things like these" (Job 16:2). The phrase in the Hebrew carries the idea of *many words, ideas, arguments. I've heard it all!* we might translate. In response, he chastised his friends: "Miserable comforters are you all!" (16: 2). "Miserable" translates the Hebrew word rendered "trouble" in Eliphaz's speech to Job (15:35); here Job used it against his accusers.

Eliphaz had called Job's words "empty" (15:2). Now Job used the same Hebrew word to describe their "long-winded" responses (16:3). He knew that he could charge them with wrongdoing as easily as they charged him, were their situations reversed (16:4). But he was sure that in contrast to their accusations, he would seek to "encourage" and "comfort" them instead (16:5).

Such arguments did not assuage his pain and grief, however (16:6), for Job knew that these men had not caused his suffering. Since Job had not brought such tragedy on himself through sin, he believed his loss could have come only from the Lord. He had been talking about his pain and about the One who caused it. Now Job turned directly to him: "Surely, O God, you have worn me out; you have devastated my entire household" (16:7). The Hebrew makes clear his emphasis: "*you* have worn me out; *you* have devastated" (italics added for emphasis). As a result, Job's "gauntness" witnessed to the world of his loss, causing his culture to blame Job for his own pain.

Innocent suffering is the great enigma in a world that is ordered around cause and effect. When consequences result from actions, life seems logical. *You reap what you sow* is not always good news, but at least it makes sense. If I chose to plagiarize this commentary, you would not be surprised if I were punished accordingly. When you're caught in sin, at least you know that you deserve what results.

But when our pain is not our fault, where do we turn? Ultimately we believe that God permitted or caused this suffering, or he is not the sovereign Lord of the universe. In Job's case he was more right than he knew. His tragedy was the direct result of God's permission. So Job turned his outrage toward the One who had caused it.

Did God strike Job with a lightning bolt for his honesty? Did God consign him to hell forever? Did God punish him further for his anger? Eventually the Lord would demonstrate his sovereign power and lead Job to humility, but not yet. Not until his servant had been given full opportunity to vent his pain and frustration. Not until Job had given honest voice to his confusion and grief.

Why are Job's travails recorded in Scripture for us to study so many centuries later? The message of this book is not prescriptive. That is, it is not, *When you face innocent suffering, do this. . .* No commandments are found here. The narrative centers only on Job, his family, his friends, and his God. But Job's example is preserved in Holy Scripture because it is still an illuminating and instructive model for us today. Just as David's act with Bathsheba was recorded to show us what not to do, Job's honest grief expressed against God is recorded to show us that our Lord invites such honesty today.

Where has God disappointed you? What prayers has God not yet answered? What suffering has God not prevented? What guidance has God not given? We can pretend that all is well, or that the fault is ours, but in our hearts we do not understand the ways and will of God in the matter. In such dark times, God invites and encourages us to be honest with him and our pain. He calls us to follow Job's example of genuine prayer, true expression, real questions, and grief.

In hard places, never forget that Jesus cried from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). Know that Jesus quoted David, a man after God's own heart (Psalm 22:1; Acts 13:22). Join them in heartfelt prayer as you direct your grief toward the Lord. Know, too, that God already knows your heart and welcomes your honesty today.

Seek help in hard times

Job would continue his invective against God, except that he did not expect to live long enough to receive the answers his heart longed to hear. Job anticipated dying from his suffering and disease. Job called on the earth after that had happened: "do not cover my blood; may my cry never be laid to rest!" (Job 16:18). As the earth cried out with the blood of Abel the innocent (Genesis 4:10), so Job asked for the same protest on his behalf.

But as Job suffered and believed his life to be ending, he knew something his friends did not: "Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high" (Job 16:19). Here Job

referred to a theme introduced earlier in the book: a heavenly advocate for his cause before God.

In Job 5:1 he spoke of the “holy ones,” probably the holy angels or “sons of God” described in the prologue of the book (Job 1:6; 2:1). As the Lord gathered them to report on their dealings, they continued dialogue with him regarding the affairs of the universe. Somehow Job knew of such beings and wished for one “to arbitrate between” himself and God (9:33).

Now Job was certain of such help: “my intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God” (16:20). Unlike his earthly companions with their accusations and easy answers, his heavenly advocate would stand by him as he poured out his grief and anger to the Lord. As Job complained, his advocate “pleads with God as a man pleads for his friend” (16:21).

Again Job knew more than he knew. Readers of the New Testament learn that the Holy Spirit is praying for us “with groans that words cannot express” (Romans 8:26). Too, we know that Jesus himself “always lives to intercede” for us (Hebrews 7:25). Without understanding the nature of divine intercession, Job nonetheless was moved to call on heavenly advocates when his earthly friends had failed him. We can do the same.

This narrative is again descriptive more than prescriptive. It models rather than commands. But the recorded example of Job does call us to similar reliance on others in hard times. Every image of the church in the New Testament is collective: a body with many members (1 Corinthians 12:12), a vine with many branches (John 15:1-8). Our faith cannot be victorious when it is alone. A coal set by itself goes out. If it stays in contact with the other coals, it burns bright. Isolation is nearly always a step toward discouragement and defeat.

In your hard place today, are you attempting to be self-sufficient? Who knows about your pain? Whose intercession have you sought? Whose counsel have you welcomed? When last did you invite the Spirit and Son to pray for you before the Father? Grief can turn us inward at the very time when we need others the most. Even Jesus wanted his friends in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-38). We need the body and help of Christ no less today.

Maintain hope in hard times

Bildad responded to the rebuke of Job in kind: “Why are we regarded as cattle and considered stupid in your sight? You who tear yourself to pieces in your anger, is the earth to be abandoned for your sake?” (Job 18:3-4). Bildad repeated his accusation that Job’s sufferings were the consequence of “one who knows not God” (18:21).

Job replied to his friends’ repeated attacks: “If it is true that I have gone astray, my error remains my concern alone” (19:4). None of their arguments had persuaded him: “know

that God has wronged me and drawn his net around me” (19:6). Indeed, God had given no response or justice to Job’s repeated cries for answers and vindication (19:7). A reader could conclude that this suffering man was ready to give up all hope of divine aid.

In fact, all Job had expressed and questioned was just preparation for perhaps the most famous words in all the Book of Job. He wished that his words would be recorded, written on a scroll, inscribed on lead, or engraved in rock forever (19:23-24). Indeed they were. Today we read with joy Job’s exclamation: “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth” (19:25).

Even now I can hear Handel’s familiar *Messiah* and its immortal rendering of this confession of praise. But of course we must read Job’s words in their original context. The Bible cannot mean what it never meant. The first step to proper hermeneutics is to ask what the author intended to say. Job had no knowledge of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice. In fact, the word “redeemer” appears nowhere in the New Testament (KJV, NIV).

By contrast, God is often called our “Redeemer” in the Hebrew Bible. For instance:

- “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer” (Psalm 19:14).
- “For your Maker is your husband—the LORD Almighty is his name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth” (Isaiah 54:5).
- “I, the LORD, am your Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob” (Isa. 60:16).

In ancient Israel, the “redeemer” was actually a *defender*, the closest kinsman and therefore responsible for avenging innocent blood. Job knew that God would be his avenger, the one who would redeem his suffering and sacrifice.

Job somehow believed that after his earthly life ended and his diseased “skin has been destroyed,” yet “I will see God” (Job 19:26). Not at second hand, not from the testimony and experience of others. Rather, “I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another” (19:27a). Job longed for that day: “How my heart yearns within me!” (19:27b). His friends had turned accusers; his God was silent to his honest cries for vindication; but Job would not abandon hope. Hope was still his—if not in this life, in the life to come.

Throughout Scripture we are told that Job was right. The suffering saints of Hebrews 11 had no hope on earth but all hope in heaven:

Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and

mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith (Hebrews 11:36-39).

Paul admitted, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). So will we all.

The Apostle was sure: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8.18). Remember Jim Elliott, the martyred missionary,¹ and his motto: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” His words are as true of us as they were of Job.

Conclusion

Do you know Job today? Is he living in your own mirror and heart? Will he attend your class this Sunday? Let’s choose to follow his example: be honest with hard times; seek help from God and his people when hard times come; and refuse to abandon hope. It is always too soon to give up on God.

Charles Spurgeon (1834-92), the great Baptist preacher, was out for a walk in the country one afternoon. He came upon a farmer’s barn with a weathervane on the roof and saw the words at the top of the weathervane, “God is love.” Just then the farmer came out, and Spurgeon asked him, “Do you mean to say that God’s love is as changing as the weather?” The farmer smiled and said, “Not at all. I mean to say that no matter where the winds blow, God is love.”

Where is the wind blowing in your soul today?

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¹ See www.answers.com/topic/jim-elliott.

BAPTISTWAY PRESS® Adult Online Bible Commentary

By Dr. Jim Denison, Pastor, Park Cities Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas

Studies in Job: Dealing with Hard Times

Lesson Five

Who Do You Think You Are, Anyway?

Focal Text

Job 38:1-21; 40:1-2

Background

Job 38:1—40:2

Main Idea

Human beings are in a poor position for insisting that God live up to their ideas about how God should act.

Question to Explore

In light of our limited knowledge and abilities, how should we relate to God?

Quick Read

Hard times are the best times to trust God anyway.

Commentary

“God in the dock” is how C. S. Lewis described the way modern people tend to approach their Creator. (In the English courtroom, the “dock” is the place where the defendant stands during trial.) See whether his statement still seems as relevant as when he first made it:

The ancient man approached God (or the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defense for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God’s acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God is in the Dock.¹

Are you guilty of judging God by your standards and expectations? Have you made the Lord of the universe a means to your ends? Consumer Christianity is popular across our culture. We judge worship services by the degree to which we are inspired and sermons

by whether we *get something out of them*. If a church doesn't meet our needs, we search for one that does. While a church should seek to serve its members, its primary purpose is to help its members serve God. He is the Audience of One, the Subject to our object, the Creator of his creation.

One way to know whether we are serving God or using God is to see how we respond when things do not go our way. To learn whether you're a servant, see how you react when people treat you like one. To measure your submission to God's will, watch your response when God does not do what you want him to do.

Inevitably the time will come when God disappoints us. When those hard days find us, we can reject our Lord and his Lordship in anger and indignation. But we don't hurt the King of kings as much as we harm ourselves. To reject all doctors because one did not make you well does not injure the medical profession; such anger just keeps you from getting the treatment you need.

The first step to the hope and help of God is admitting we need them. When God doesn't do what we want God to do, we can trust God anyway. Or we can repeat the folly of Job. Let's learn from the latter how to choose the former.

Who are we to question God?

Our Father welcomes honest questions from his children. Jesus' repetition of David's cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46; Psalm 22:1), was the genuine expression of a hurting soul. The Lord invites us to "reason" with him, literally to *argue it out* with our God (Isaiah 1:18). When doubts and struggles arise, God would rather we talk with him than about him.

However, humans can go too far. Richard Dawkins's new bestseller, *The God Delusion*, argues in the strongest terms that religion does far more harm than good and that God almost certainly does not exist.² Christopher Hitchens's *God Is Not Great* is subtitled *How Religion Poisons Everything* and makes the remarkably antagonistic claim that "religion spoke its last intelligible or noble or inspiring words a long time ago."³

Such attacks on God are nothing new. Across our study, we have watched Job deal with his pain by challenging the God who permitted it. He has not so much asked about God's ways as he has complained about his character and nature. His friends could not dissuade him from the theological conclusion that he has been right and God has been wrong. Even Elihu's long speech in defense of the ways and character of God (Job 32—37) has not changed this suffering man's conviction and conclusions.

To Job's mind, the Lord has acted in ways that are unfair, capricious, and even immoral. In a worldview that tied circumstances directly to character, Job knew that he deserved blessing rather than tragedy. If a judge admitted that we were innocent of murder but sentenced us to life in prison anyway, we would not ask intellectual questions about the

legal system. Rather, we would complain bitterly about the judge's immoral and corrupt nature.

Of course, Job did not know what we know. He did not know that his obedience was God's means to Satan's defeat, or that he would soon be rewarded for his steadfast character. Counselors say that there is usually *one thing more* we don't know about a person whose actions we criticize. If you knew that the employee who stole from you was desperate to pay a sick child's medical bill, or that the absentee class member who was rude to your phone call was struggling with his spouse's infidelity, you would understand such behavior better.

One thing more is of course most true with regard to the God of the universe. There is always something we do not know about the ways and will of the Lord. In fact, God plainly warns us that "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Isa. 55:8).

When we refuse to admit the limits of our understanding and continue to challenge the nature and character of the Holy God, we can expect God's response to be direct and compelling. God's word to Job is God's word to all who challenge his integrity: "Then the Lord answered Job out of the storm. He said: 'Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?'" (Job 38:1-2).

God spoke to Job "out of the storm" that had already been gathering (see Job 37:1-3). Such a storm is a biblical symbol of divine judgment, going back to Noah's flood (see Psalm 50:3-4: "Our God comes and will not be silent; a fire devours before him, and around him a tempest rages. He summons the heavens above, and the earth, that he may judge his people"). God speaks from the storm to show his audience that he is God and we are not (see Ezekiel 1:4; Zechariah 9:14).

"Who is this that darkens" is more literally translated, *Who then is darkening?* The Hebrew word translated "darkens" here means *to distort or judge falsely by uttering meaningless words*. Job distorted God's "counsel," God's ways and decisions (see Ps. 33:10-11; Proverbs 19:21). Even worse, Job did so by using "words without knowledge." Job criticized the omniscient God but had no idea what he was saying or doing.

Job had earlier challenged God: "let the Almighty answer me" (Job 31:35). He had promised to answer the Lord's direct response (see 9:35; 13:22; 31:37). Now God gave Job what he wanted: "Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me" (38:3). "Brace yourself" translates Hebrew words literally rendered *gird yourself up*, in the sense of gathering up a robe in preparation for a battle. *Get ready to fight* catches the sense. Job had been asking the questions; now he would answer those the Almighty asked.

When we come to God as a lawyer examining a defendant, we will never find God's guidance or hope. A doctor cannot defend herself from a patient's misguided criticisms

and at the same time give that patient the help he needs. The right way to approach the Creator of the universe is in a spirit of honest humility. We can ask our questions, but we must recognize that we ask them of the Maker of all that is. When our fist is clenched in anger, it cannot be open to receive God's grace.

What do we know about the ways of God?

Job wanted God to account for his decision to allow his suffering. But Job's finite and fallen mind could not begin to comprehend the heavenly and eternal battle between God and Satan or his own role in this cosmic drama. For God to try to explain himself to Job would be akin to a college professor attempting to help a preschooler understand calculus.

We don't know what we don't know. Since Job could not understand, God's only option was to help Job understand that he could not understand. What follows was not evasive behavior on God's part. Rather it was the gracious counsel of the Almighty in leading his suffering servant to see himself in the light of divine omnipotence. Only then would Job surrender himself to his Lord and find in God's grace the help and solace his hurting heart longed to know.

Consider the world's creation

God began his cross-examination with the most critical issue: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?" (38:4). God "laid the earth's foundation" or *founded* the world, as God's word consistently makes clear (see Isa. 48:13; 51:13, 16; Zech. 12:1; Prov. 3:19). If Job was there when God made the universe, let him say so: "Tell me, if you understand" (Job 38:4b). Understanding is commonly connected with wisdom in the Old Testament (see Deuteronomy 4:6; Isa. 29:14).

If Job had been present when the world was created, he would have known some important facts about it. "Who marked off its dimensions?" (Job 38:5) is better translated, *In what manner were its dimensions marked?* Our telescopes can see billions of light years into the universe, and yet God measures all of that with the palm of his hand (Isa. 40:12). If Job knew so much about how the world should work, at least he should know its dimensions.

Too, he should know its construction: "on what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone"? (Job 38:6). "Footings" relates to the framework of a building; the "cornerstone" is laid at the beginning of the work and supports the structure. If Job did not even know how the world was made or what dimensions it occupies, how could he criticize its operations?

As God made the universe, "the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy" (38:7). "Morning stars" were the stars that existed on the first morning. They and "all the angels" of God "shouted for joy," a biblical response to God's creative genius (see Isa. 49:13). God was there for it all. Where was Job?

The *cosmological* argument for God's existence works from cosmos to Creator. For instance, if we argue that the universe began with a Big Bang, we must ask where the Big Bang came from. If we believe that life originated as a cell floating in a pool of water, we must determine the origin of the cell and the water. Before we decide to argue with the Maker of all that is, we had best acknowledge that we are created, not Creator.

Consider the world's design

Another defense of God's existence is the *teleological* argument (from the Greek word *telos*, meaning *design*). In its classic formulation, this approach asks us to imagine finding a rock on the beach. We could assume that the rock happened to be there by random chance. But if we then found a watch in the sand, we would assume the existence of a watchmaker. We would not believe that the watch's hands, inner workings, face, and strap all happened to fall together by coincidence. If a watch demonstrates a watchmaker, how much more does the world's design indicate a Designer.

Each part of God's creation indicates God's infinite wisdom and our limited understanding of God's creation. Consider the seas, seen through the eye of an ancient observer: why do they go only so far and no farther? What lies beyond their horizon? Who "shut up the sea behind doors" at its creation? (38:8). God "made the clouds its garment" by day and "wrapped it in thick darkness" by night (38:9). He "fixed limits for it" and "set its doors and bars in place" (38:10), stopping them before they flooded all the earth (38:11) God alone understands the watery limits of the oceans; God designed them so that they permitted Job to live on dry land (see Prov. 8:29; Jeremiah 5:22).

Now imagine a sunrise in ancient times. What person has "given orders to the morning" or "shown the dawn its place," causing the sun to come up from the night (Job 38:12)? The sun then appears to "take the earth by the edges" as a garment, while its light exposes "the wicked" and their deeds done under cover of night (38:13). Under its rays "the earth takes shape" as clay is imprinted by a seal or signet ring, its features emerging from the darkness (38:14). When day comes, the wicked are unmasked and judged by God (38:15; see 24:13). They are "denied their light" in the sense that their lives are forfeited and their sinful arms are "broken" (38:15). These descriptions indicate God's power.

From the oceans Job could see, God turned to the depths Job could not see: "Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep?" (38:16). The Hebrews typically thought of the sea as being fed by a great abyss of water and its channels, much as they observed the way rivers feed lakes (see Ps. 24:2). None in the ancient world had ever seen such depths and survived.

Even less understood were the depths of death: "Have the gates of death been shown to you? Have you seen the gates of the shadow of death?" (Job 38:17). The region beyond life was often described as a land with gates barred to the living (see Ps. 9:13-14; 107:18; Isa. 38:10). Job could not understand the dimensions of his present life, much less the life

to come. In short, God asked his accuser, “Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this” (Job 38:18).

But God was not finished with the examination. “What is the way to the abode of light” during the night (38:19)? “Where does the darkness reside” during the day (38:19b)? Could Job “take them to their places” (38:20)? If Job were wise enough to question the Maker of the universe, he should know these elementary facts about God’s creation (38:21). For the first time in the book, Job was silent.

God’s citation of his power and understanding would continue for another chapter. In Job 39, the Creator would turn from the physical world to its occupants, themselves as wondrous and mysterious as their environment. He reminded Job of the mountain goats who live and bear their young beyond human observation (39:1-4). He described the wild donkey and its freedom beyond the reach of people (39:5-8). He pointed to the wild ox, its strength beyond a farmer’s control (39:9-12). He described the stork, so unintelligent that she would lay her eggs where they could be trampled by wild animals, and yet was able to fly far beyond horse and rider (39:13-18).

Job could not compete with the horse for strength (39:19-25) or the hawk and eagle for speed and sight (39:26-30). Nothing God mentioned was within Job’s understanding or control. Yet these were just everyday examples of God’s creative power and wisdom.

The more we learn about God’s creation, the more we can add to the litany of Job 38—39. For instance, you are the greatest miracle you know. Your body consists of 206 bones, wrapped with more than 600 muscles and seven miles of nerve fibers. Your eyes possess about 100 million receptors. Your heart beats about 36,000,000 times every year and sends blood pumping through more than 60,000 miles of veins, arteries, and tubing.

Your brain contains billions of nerve cells. Too, your unconscious brain database, that which your unconscious brain knows and stores, outweighs your conscious brain on an order exceeding 10 million to one. You literally cannot imagine how remarkable you are.

Now glance at the matter and energy God has made. Imagine a wall with hundreds of dials. Each must be at exactly the right setting for carbon-based life to emerge in a suburb of the Milky Way. If the cosmic expansion of the universe had first been a fraction less, it would have imploded billions of years ago; a fraction more intense, and galaxies could not have formed. The odds of our universe’s existence and design occurring by random chance would not be accepted by any gambler anywhere.

In the face of such creative wonder, who are we to challenge the character, intelligence, and will of our God?

Conclusion

Our study ends with God's final question: "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!" (40:2). "Contends" renders the Hebrew for *arguing or wrestling with another*. "Accuses" means *to criticize or find fault*. Job had been doing both. Now, in light of divine omnipotence and omniscience, it was God's turn to demand answers from Job. Job had none to give.

It may be that you or your class members are struggling this week with the unexplained ways of God. If not, you soon will. We are invited to bring God our genuine doubts, fears, and struggles. But God cannot help us if we will not trust God's omnipotence and omniscience. As long as we are the consumer and God is the commodity, we the accuser and God the accused, we cannot hear God's guiding voice or receive God's healing grace.

This is a good day to submit anew to the perfect will of your Lord, to acknowledge that God's plans are always for your best (see Romans 12:2; Jeremiah 29:11). We will not understand fully God's ways in this fallen world until we see God in glory (see 1 Corinthians 13:12). In the meanwhile, when we cannot see God's hand, we can trust God's heart.

A good friend of President Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), the naturalist William Beebe, would on occasion stay at Roosevelt's family home. They would go out on its lawn at night. They would search the skies until they found the faint spot of light behind the lower lefthand corner of the Great Square of Pegasus. Then they would remember together the words:

That is the Spiral Galaxy in Andromeda.
It is as large as our Milky Way.
It is one of a hundred million galaxies.
It consists of one hundred billion suns,
Each larger than our sun.

According to the story, President Roosevelt then would grin at Mr. Beebe and say, "Now I think we are small enough. Shall we go in?" Are we small enough to go to God?

¹ C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 244.

² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

³ Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 7.

TNT
2020-2021
Dealing with Hard Times
Job, Ecclesiastes, Habakkuk, and Lamentations

Session 5

Ignition - Read Job 38:1-21; 40:1-2

Detonation

1. God's response in Job 38 is to remind Job of who God is and what God has done. When you read God's response to Job, what are some of the phrases that stand out to you and why?

2. Read 40:1-5. When Job listens to God's response, how does he reply now in the face of God's evidence?

BAPTISTWAY PRESS® Adult Online Bible Commentary

By Dr. Jim Denison, Pastor, Park Cities Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas

Studies in Job: Dealing with Hard Times

Lesson Six

Faith and Hope When We Don't Understand

Focal Text

Job 40:3-9; 42:1-12a

Background

Job 40:3—42:17

Main Idea

We can have faith and hope that God will provide in spite of our lack of full understanding of why suffering comes.

Question to Explore

What's more important—to know why suffering comes or to know that God will provide for us?

Quick Read

We must trust God most when we understand him least.

Commentary

Sam Harris is one of a new group of aggressive atheists making news these days. His most recent book is titled *Letter to a Christian Nation*. In it he intends to show Christians why we are wrong and atheists are right. One area of evidence he cites concerns the so-called “intelligent design” of the universe. Here is his response:

The biologist J. B. S. Haldane is reported to have said that, if there is a God, He has “an inordinate fondness for beetles.” One would have hoped that an observation this devastating would have closed the book on creationism for all time. The truth is that, while there are now around three hundred and fifty thousand known species of beetles, God appears to have an even greater fondness for viruses. Biologists estimate that there are at least ten strains of virus for every species of animal on earth. Many viruses . . . invade our cells only to destroy them, destroying us in the process—horribly, mercilessly, relentlessly. Viruses like HIV, as well as a wide range of harmful bacteria, can be seen evolving right

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under our noses, developing resistance to antiviral and antibiotic drugs to the detriment of everyone. Evolution both predicts and explains this phenomenon; the book of Genesis does not.¹

Harris goes on to complain about men's urinary tracts, women's pelvic dimensions, and the pharynx design in children, claiming that an omniscient God could not have made us the way we are. As I read this book, I thought about the story of a biologist who bragged that he could have made a better world than the one God created. He challenged the Almighty to a creative duel, and God accepted. The biologist scooped up some dirt to get started. God said, "Get your own dirt."

This week we will watch the debate between Job and God come to its end. We will learn that we can trust God even (and especially) when we don't understand him. You or someone you know will need such faith this week.

Listen before we speak (40:3-9)

Be careful what you ask for, because you may get it. No one understood the theological truth of that advice better than Job. For most of the book bearing his name he demanded an audience with the Almighty. He wanted to vindicate his innocence before a culture that assumed his tragedies were somehow his fault. He wanted an explanation from God for the suffering he had experienced.

He was sure that if such a debate were to occur, he would win the victory:

Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him;
I will surely defend my ways to his face.
Indeed, this will turn out for my deliverance,
for no godless man would dare come before him!
Listen carefully to my words;
let your ears take in what I say.
Now that I have prepared my case,
I know I will be vindicated (Job 13:15-17).

Job was confident and bold before his friends. But not so when he actually met the One whose explanations he demanded. After hearing of the Almighty's creative power over the scope of the universe, Job finally was permitted to speak. His reply was the first word of humility to be found in all the book: "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).

Job now knew he was "unworthy," a Hebrew word meaning *lightweight*. At one time, in Job's presence "the chief men refrained from speaking and covered their mouths with their hands" (29:9). Now Job did the same before Almighty God.

If Job would not answer God, God would continue to speak to Job. Still appearing in “the storm” (40:6), the Lord was direct and blunt: “Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me” (40:7). This was the second time God called Job to “brace yourself” (see 38:3), literally *gird your loins like a man*. God clearly heard Job’s earlier complaints: “Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?” (40:8). Job had consistently maintained his innocence and criticized God’s character by implication: “Relent, do not be unjust; reconsider, for my integrity is at stake” (6:29).

Now God would call his critic to compare himself with the Almighty: “Do you have an arm like God’s, and can your voice thunder like his?” (40:9). The rest of Job 40—41 would remind this man that he was not God and that the Lord’s creative power was beyond human control or even comprehension. And Job would relent.

Think for a moment about those people in Scripture who experienced a genuine encounter with the living God. What was their response?

- Isaiah: “‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty’” (Isaiah 6:5).
- Jeremiah: “‘Ah, Sovereign Lord,’ I said, ‘I do not know how to speak; I am only a child’” (Jeremiah 1:6).
- Peter: “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8).
- John on Patmos: “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead” (Revelation 1:17).

Recall the time you met a person of unusual power or significance. I remember as though it were yesterday the time I met Billy Graham. I was part of the team sent by the Dallas-Fort Worth coalition formed to invite Dr. Graham to our area for a mission in 2002. Dr. Graham was preaching in the fall of 2001 at a mission in Fresno, California. When we stepped into the room where he was waiting to go onto the stage, we found him reading his sermon notes and sipping a glass of water. He looked up at us with the most piercing, penetrating eyes I have ever seen. His holiness and humility were unmistakable and transforming. I felt myself shrink in the presence of such a man of God. And I thought about the way he must feel in the presence of the Lord.

When was the last time you spent an hour listening to the Lord? A spiritual inventory is essential to spiritual progress. Ask the Spirit to show you anything wrong between you and your Father. Write down whatever comes to mind, and confess it specifically and honestly. Claim God’s forgiving grace (1 John 1:9). It’s been said that the closer we get to God, the further away we realize we are. When will you next step into God’s presence with silent humility?

Even God cannot speak to those who will not be quiet enough to hear him. When we face unexplained suffering, it is best to listen to the voice of the One who understands. Humility comes before revelation, always.

Believe before we understand (42:1-12a)

Reading the Book of Job can be a frustrating experience. Watching Job and his “friends” debate without resolution the issue of innocent suffering leaves us frustrated and confused. But finally, when Job saw himself in the light of God’s holiness, his words bring the entire book into focus and significance. The first twelve verses of Job 42 form a theodicy (justification of God in the face of evil and suffering) more complete than any other single chapter of Scripture can offer. With Job we discover the steps to help and hope in the hard places of life.

First: *trust the character of God*. Job testified: “I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2). As we have seen in previous weeks, the holiness of God requires him to redeem all he permits or causes. He is “holy, holy, holy” (Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8). He is perfect in every way. He cannot do anything wrong. Even when we do not understand God’s ways, we can trust God’s character. He must always do what is right.

Second: *admit your need of God’s help*. Job confessed: “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know” (Job 42:3). He had struggled with his innocent suffering, but his theology was formed in ignorance. He did not understand fully the nature or ways of the one true God. We never can. But we can turn to our Father for wisdom and grace.

Third: *seek God’s intimate presence*. God had called Job to stand before him and answer his challenge (42:4). Now Job admitted, “My ears had heard of you” (42:5a). His knowledge of God had been secondhand. Like the Corinthians, he had lived on spiritual milk (digested food) rather than the meat of his presence (see 1 Corinthians 3:1-2).

However, “now my eyes have seen you” (Job 42:5b). The psalmist called us to “seek his face always” (Psalm 105:4). We can know that God walks beside us even in the valley of deepest shadows (Ps. 23:4), that when we “pass through the waters” God is with us (Isa. 43:2). When we face the hard places of life, we need the intimate presence of our Father. We can know that if we will draw close to God, God will draw close to us (James 4:8).

Fourth: *submit to God’s Lordship*. Upon seeing the Lord as he is, Job responded honestly: “Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6). “Despise myself” carries the sense of *I repent* or *I admit my sin*. All through the book Job had maintained his innocence. Now he judged himself not by others but by the Lord. And Job knew that none are righteous in comparison to God: “there is no one who does good, not even one” (Ps. 14:3). So Job repented “in dust and ashes,” a common way for Jews to express their mourning (see Ezekiel 27:30). He submitted himself completely and unconditionally to the only One whose holiness is beyond question. In so doing he spoke “what is right” (Job 42:7).

Fifth: *trust God's purpose*. Immediately on hearing such humble contrition, the Lord responded in ways that contradicted completely the conventional wisdom of the day. He rebuked Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite “because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7). In their world, suffering was connected with sin, and health and prosperity were sure signs of godliness. Yet the Lord called them to make a sacrifice for their sins before Job (42:8a).

In a further twist of irony, God promised that Job would pray for his critical friends as he had prayed for his own family (42:8b; see 1:5). Then God would forgive them for their “folly” (42:8c). The “friends” quickly obeyed the Lord, and “the Lord accepted Job’s prayer” (42:9).

Once Job had demonstrated his faithful obedience by intercession, “the Lord made him prosperous again and gave him twice as much as he had before” (42:10). If Job’s previous sufferings had been the result of sin, God could not have so blessed this man. He wanted to comfort and console Job for his loss, and to use his faithfulness as proof before Satan and human history that it is possible to trust God even when we do not understand him. So “the Lord blessed the latter part of Job’s life more than the first” (42:12a). The epilogue resumed Job’s life circumstances from the prologue (Job 1—2), with double the material blessings this wealthy man had earlier known.

Of course, not all who are faithful to God on earth will see reward on earth. Jesus’ faithful disciples all died as martyrs (except John, who was exiled and persecuted greatly). Paul was beheaded. Many early Christians were executed. Present faithfulness does not guarantee present prosperity. But it does guarantee eternal reward. It has been noted that Nero beheaded Paul, and now we name our sons *Paul* and our dogs *Nero*.

In the end, Job’s story does not solve the problem of innocent pain. It does not explain that which finite and fallen minds cannot understand. Rather, it offers practical wisdom, telling us not so much why we suffer as what to do when suffering comes. If we will trust God’s character despite all evidence to the contrary, admit our need of God’s help, seek God’s presence, submit to God’s Lordship, and trust God’s purpose, God will redeem all he permits or causes.

Sometimes, as with Job, we are privileged on earth to see the result and reward of obedience. Sometimes we must wait for eternity to show us God’s ultimate plan and reward (see Rev. 6:9-10, where the martyrs wait for justice). But either way, we can know that our present sufferings do not compare with the glory to be revealed by our loving Father (see Romans 8:18).

Conclusion

I have been reading *My Utmost for His Highest*, the devotional guide by Oswald Chambers, every morning since it was first given to me in 1989. Out of all the profound insights it contains, one that constantly challenges me is this claim:

The golden rule for understanding spiritually is not intellect, but obedience. If a man wants scientific knowledge, intellectual curiosity is his guide; but if he wants insight into what Jesus Christ teaches, he can only get it by obedience. If things are dark to me, then I may be sure there is something I will not do. Intellectual darkness comes through ignorance; spiritual darkness comes because of something I do not intend to obey.²

In the end, the “solution” to suffering is obedience. We understand to the degree that we obey. No one in the Bible ever received a five-year plan. If we will be faithful to the last word we heard from God while open to the next, we can know that this day's obedience bears eternal significance. If we will listen for God's voice and trust God's purpose, we will know our Father's direction and hope. We must trust God most when we understand God least.

Why do you need that reminder today?

¹ Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 75-76.

² Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest* (Westwood, NJ: Barbour and Company, n.d.), 209, reading for July 27.

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TNT
2020-2021
Dealing with Hard Times
Job, Ecclesiastes, Habakkuk, and Lamentations

Session 6

Ignition - Read Job 40:3-9, 42:1-12a

Detonation

1. What does God tell Job to do before he speaks?

2. Why do you think God says, "Brace yourself?"

3. What does Job say about his understanding in 42:3?

4. What does God say to Job's friends?

5. What did Job do for his friends?

6. What did God do for Job?

7. How does Job's story end?

Explosive Thinking

1. Job's friends have to repent for their bad advice. God makes them make amends with Job. Why do you think God asked the friends to make amends with Job?

2. Job prayed for his friends. Why was it important for Job to pray for his friends? Many times, people let us down when we are suffering. In what ways have others failed you in times of trouble? Have you forgiven them? Why is it hard to forgive and what steps can you take toward forgiveness?

6. What does Job's story say to you about seasons of suffering and seasons of being "full of life?"