

Job – the pain and despair of a righteous man

How do we make sense of trials and tribulations in our lives? By knowing and trusting God and His Word.

Today is an interesting point in our 10 part series looking at the book of Job. Most of us are quite familiar with how the story unfolds at the beginning of the book: the requests of Satan, the response by God, and finally the tragedies that befall Job. Mostly, we get to the end of Chapter 2 . . . and we stop there. Any further study of the book tends to be of selected scriptures or broad summaries. Today that changes.

The scene is that Job has lost his business and income, his children have all been killed, and finally his health is severely compromised. We find him in an almost unrecognizable state, sitting in misery for an entire week with his three friends: Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite.

Job 3

Chapter 3 begins with a bitter lament from Job. In fact we might call this “The venting of Job.” At least a week has gone by since the various tragedies have befallen him and he was first afflicted with this painful disease. To Job God is silent and gives no explanation of why all this is happening. Job knows nothing of what we have been informed of in the opening chapters, so, baffled and buffeted and tormented with physical misery, he now opens his mouth with a tremendous cry in which he longs for death and he curses the day on which he was born.

In his lament Job asks three main questions:

1. Why was I ever born? (1-10)

You can see at this point how his life has become so miserable that he longs for death. Even all that he has enjoyed in the past seems of no value in the face of this tremendous anguish that he must endure. But note that although Job comes very close to cursing God, he never does. He does curse the day of his birth, and he curses what God has allowed to happen. You can see how the pressure is increasing, and Job is beginning to break and crumble under it, as this unceasing, unexplained anguish goes on.

I do not think anything is harder for us to bear than unexplained trouble. If we could see some reason for what we have to go through, we could possibly endure it much more easily. But when trouble seems to be pointless, and nothing positive seems to be accomplished by it, it is a terrible strain upon the soul. This is what Job is experiencing, so he cries out, "Why was I ever born?"

When we are in the midst of life’s test, we often ask, "Why me? Why now? Why this? Why do I have to get sick? Why have I lost my job? Why is my marriage crumbling? Why is my loved one going through this trial? What is the purpose of this test? Can’t I learn the lesson some other way? Why can’t it end now? I just can’t handle this any longer.

When no answer is given, many respond by cursing God and longing to die. Others ignore the reality of God and try to face the test alone. Job did not curse God. Job did not leave God. In fact in all this, Job did not sin in what he said. Job knew enough about God’s goodness to answer his own heart’s questions.

Life’s tests have a way of blurring God’s goodness. Job was in such anguish that he wanted to die. He lost everything that gives us meaning, his possessions and his family.

2. Why didn't I die at birth? (11-19)

"My life has been totally meaningless," Job says. "It would have been better to have died when I was born." The deep pain he was enduring was so great he wished that he had died at birth. To Job it seemed that it would have been better to have missed out on all his life's experiences and saved himself from going through this great misery. But I believe Job didn't give up, because Job knew God's character didn't change in the midst of life's test.

Job's lament and questions reflected his helplessness but not his hopelessness. Helplessness is the feeling or the fact of powerlessness to help oneself. Our wealth, our friends, our support systems and even our will to live can be taken from us. At that moment, we can become helpless. But we are not hopeless. It is often when we are in our deepest and darkest moments that we realise that our only hope is in God and He will enable us to recover.

3. Why can't I die now? (20-26)

Job's third question is, "Why can't I die now?" "Why was I born? But, having been born, why didn't I die when I came out of the womb? And since that didn't happen, why can't I die now?"

Job's argument is, "What's the purpose of my life? What use is a life that is so filled with misery that you can do nothing but suffer and feel anguish? My life produces only fear and trouble, so it would be better to have it end now."

Many people feel that way. I do not think Job is thinking of suicide -- he is asking God to take him home. There is no purpose to life, he says, when it is not enjoyable. That is a very common argument, and it is one of the reasons we have been given this book. It is to help us understand that life can still have a great deal of meaning even when life is so difficult and we despair so much we just want death to overtake us.

Job's suffering was tremendous. But worse than that, there seemed to be no end in sight to his pain and things weren't getting better. You know, the most severe test of life is not the immediate crises but the prolonged pain that follows. That is why it is so important that we learn to hold on to our faith when we are waiting for answers or some relief even if it doesn't come.

Where we put our hope in good times and in helpless times will determine whether we have the will to live, whether we regain strength for the race, and whether we will pass the test.

Through all this Job did NOT curse God. Job might have questioned God but he didn't blame God. Job chose faith in God through all his despair misery. And it is Job's example of continued faith in God that brings me to my next points.

A. Choosing faith in the midst of suffering will not . . .

1. Eliminate the pain.

Job was nearly crushed by the pain of suffering. He tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell to the ground when he heard that his children had died. His physical ailments were so painful, he used broken pottery as instruments for homemade surgery.

And yet in the midst of such pain and heartache, Job issued some of the greatest statements of faith ever heard.

"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised." (Job 1:21)

"Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" In all this, Job did not sin in what he said. (Job 2:10)

Having, and living, a faith in God does not mean that all our problems will go away. We preach a completely false Gospel if we ever give an indication that the Christian life will be a picnic – or a walk in the park – or a bed of roses. Faith in God is not a magic pass to a trouble-free life.

Having faith in God doesn't stop grief from practically bulldozing over us. But conversely, the presence of pain doesn't mean there is an absence of faith.

Our pain simply reminds us that not all is right with the world, and that we aren't dwelling in the perfect garden paradise God first created for us. And therefore, our faith and our pain are forced to coexist.

2. (Choosing faith in the midst of suffering will not . . .) Stop the questions.

In the book of Job, two chapters of great faith are followed immediately by 35 chapters of great questions. But Job wasn't alone with his questions.

Jeremiah couldn't preach without weeping, questioning how God could have allowed such despair.

David wrestled with questions for years, especially while hiding from Saul and wondering if he'd even live to see the reign that the prophet had said would be his. Remember how he began **Psalm 13**?

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

When we go through times of struggle, despair or tragedy, we will have questions we want to ask God.

Has He forgotten me? Does He hate me? Why does He seem to hide Himself? I am weary of listening to people give me clichéd explanations. I want God to answer me in person. If only I could state my case before Him and hear His answer!

I don't want us to get ahead of ourselves and talk about other things that will come later in the series. But Job doesn't get an answer from God to his questions. God never explains to Job why all this has happened to him. What does eventually happen is that Job's eyes are opened even more to who God is . . . and that in itself satisfies Job.

3. (Choosing faith in the midst of suffering will not . . .) Create a "logical" reason for your suffering.

The book of Job presents one of the most unusual pictures in all the Bible. The God of all the universe entertains an audience with Satan. The subject of their celestial conversation is a nearly flawless man, and how he might be tortured. It's a test fit for the Roman Coliseum, and God Himself takes a seat to see how much of a beating Job can take. We don't like anything about the story. We don't like God having a conversation with the enemy. We don't like God watching from the sidelines. We don't enjoy the results of the blood-letting. Nothing about this story seems to make sense, and it certainly isn't satisfying.

That's part of the point. Suffering doesn't make sense, either. The more natural expectation in life is spelled out in the first paragraph of Job. We want for every new baby to have a good family, a good childhood, a good education, eventually a fulfilling and well-compensated job, a good home, and a retirement set against the sunset of a perfect life.

We want the first paragraph of Job, which tells us this man was blameless, upright, righteous, and the greatest man among his people. He was a man who did without something we'd all like to do without. He was a man without suffering.

Our expectation of such a life soon collides with reality. Suffering comes well armed, with grief, hardship, misfortune, illness, crisis, tragedy and more. It pays no attention to age, sex, nationality, or the size of one's bank account.

In the midst of such hardship, faith is still an option, even if it appears illogical to choose faith. Choosing faith in the midst of suffering, as Job did, may look like insanity to all who watch. Job's friends tried mightily to find logic while they looked at the illogical comparison of great faith, and great suffering. Job's wife certainly didn't think highly of her husband's nonsensical faith. Her only lines in the book? "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!" (2:9)

A lot of things about faith don't make sense to those outside the circle of faith. Eventually, God would work his greatest triumph through what appeared to be His greatest loss. **"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing," Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." – 1 Cor. 1:18**

Despite all of the reasons why Job might not have chosen faith in the midst of his suffering, he chose faith anyway. By doing so, he made the better choice, by far, and survived his season of grief. His choices also illustrate the wonderful things faith will do for us, if we'll make the choice of faith in the midst of suffering.

B. Choosing faith in the midst of suffering will . . .

1. Remind you that God is in control.

What a tough choice! When we choose faith, we must trust the very God who allows the difficult circumstances in the first place.

But look carefully at Job's story. The only being in complete control of all events, is God. Throughout the entire event, God is always in control. **Choosing faith doesn't allow God to be in control – it only reminds us that this truth has always been, and will always be.**

Study the conversation between God and Satan. Job would have struggled with that conversation as much as we do. Job wouldn't have liked the conversation, nor would it have made sense to him. But there's no doubt that the conversation was crystal clear to God. God wasn't tricked by Satan. He didn't misunderstand. God carefully weighed the options, considered the ramifications, and permitted what followed. At no time was God out of control.

What are our options in the midst of out-of-control suffering? On the one hand, we could reject the God who allows suffering. Many do. On the other hand, we could trust the only Being in all Creation that remains in control above all evil, and all suffering. Though suffering doesn't make sense, and faith in the midst of suffering seems to make even less sense, placing your life in the hands of the only God who can take care of you in this world and the next is ultimately the only logical action a person can ever take.

2. (Choosing faith in the midst of suffering will . . .) Be a rare gift to God.

Anyone can sing a song of praise on the good days. All of us have. But it takes a person of tremendous faith, and tremendous spiritual maturity to sing those same songs of praise on the bad days. If you can do that, you will give God a precious gift of worship that may be unlike any other gift you could ever give Him.

Job was wise enough to know that God had controlled the good days, and the success of his life, just as surely as God was now controlling the bad days. Beyond that, Job learned a lesson that must be remembered in a time of suffering. Nothing about your present circumstances – be they good or bad – have changed the first thing about the nature of God. God is still the same today, just as He was the same yesterday, and the same He will be tomorrow. That God is always worthy of praise.

In the midst of the worst of it, when he knew so little that seemed secure, Job hung on to one truth. **"I know that my Redeemer lives," he told his more comfortable friends, "and that in the end he will stand upon the earth." (Job 19:25)** Without the circumstances, we might not have remembered Job's words at all. Understanding how bad Job had it when he said such a thing is what makes the words memorable to us, and a precious gift to God.

On their first visit to Philippi, Paul and Silas were wrongly accused, beaten severely, and thrown into painful stocks in the town dungeon. What were they doing at midnight? According to the history of Acts 16, they were singing their songs of praise to the same God who'd let them go through a Job-like day.

During the midnight song service, a miraculous earthquake came with just enough power to free the men, but not kill them. That single day of suffering, coupled with the way two faith-driven men reacted to that suffering, created a church in Philippi that would help change the world. It was one of the greatest gifts either man ever gave their Saviour. Had they missed the opportunity, they would have never had such a great harvest in that community.

If you're in the midst of suffering, you're also in the midst of an incredible opportunity. If you can worship now, the gift you give may be more valuable than it ever has been, or ever will be again.

3. (Choosing faith in the midst of suffering will . . .) Bring you closer to God.

Though he didn't know it yet, Job was involved in the most intimate encounter with God that he'd ever have in his lifetime. Through the season of suffering that had fallen upon him, he was starting a short journey that would lead to his greatest understanding of who God was. It would lead him to a more intimate encounter with God.

Unfortunately, not every person comes closer to God on the road of suffering. Some use the road to go in the opposite direction, going further away from God than ever before. Pharaoh, for instance, destroyed his entire country when he refused to acknowledge God in the midst of the pre-exodus suffering. Most of the kings that would rule the divided kingdom of Israel and Judah couldn't find faith in the midst of various hardships, and both kingdoms fell as a direct result of their faithlessness. A rich man, afraid to suffer the loss of his material wealth, missed walking with the Messiah. Judas was overwhelmed by his own, self-inflicted heartache, and he missed the resurrection.

But for every lost opportunity, the Bible provides plenty of success stories.

All of the patriarchs – Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses – suffered for decades before seeing how faithful God could be to those who simply would not let go of their faith. David became more than a king. He became the most beloved song-writer in the history of faith, and most of his great psalms came straight out of his seasons of suffering.

All the disciples knew suffering. Thankfully, they also found a life-changing resurrection at the end of the worst weekend of their lives. To say that they learned a bit about God through that weekend would be the understatement of history! They found that the Jesus they'd followed was the confirmed Christ, the Son of God . . . a Messiah who faced great suffering with great courage.

Ever since, those who have suffered and looked for God have been finding hope in the Saviour who died for them. God is greater than our highs and lows. **Suffering brings us closer to God, mainly because we turn to Him when there is nowhere else to turn.**

The final say . . .

Normally at the end of my talks I try to present some practical ways to apply the lessons that have been discussed. Today, I want to finish a different way. On Wednesday we received a newsletter from a particular Christian ministry. At the end it had three quotes – and it is with these quotes that I would like to finish as I believe they sum up what we have talked about this morning.

We are too prone to engrave our trials in marble and write our blessings in sand. (Charles Spurgeon)

While it looks like things are out of control, behind the scenes there is a God who hasn't surrendered His authority. (A. W. Tozer)

Look around and be distressed. Look within and be depressed. Look at Jesus and be at rest. When we look at Him we are victorious. (Corrie Ten Boom)