

SESSION NINE

LESSONS ON UNEXPLAINED SUFFERING

The Book of Job

I. INTRODUCTION

The Book of Job would make a good starting point for the study of the Old Testament. The opening of Genesis does not really instruct us about the nature of God, His character, or the world of Satan and his demons. We hardly even notice there is a spiritual conflict raging until it is too late—the man and woman have fallen for the serpent's scheme and forfeited their initial entrustment. Is the God introduced in Gen 1:1 a good God? What is Satan's attitude toward men, especially to those who follow the LORD God? It is these kinds of fundamental questions that the book of Job prompts us to probe into.

To deal with these types of questions, however, man must first be made to taste of suffering, for it is only in his experience of suffering that he is able to come to grips with the character of God in contrast with that of Satan. More specifically, the book of Job is about "unexplained suffering," which causes him to question the character of God. The immortal question "Why?" must be asked. In essence Job asks, "Why am I made to suffer when I have been innocent" and "how can God deal with me this way, if He is really a righteous and just God?"

II. THE SETTING FOR THE BOOK

- A. The setting is probably during the time of the Patriarchs (note Job's age in 42:16, as well as the absence of reference to the Mosaic Law). He is a very blessed man, but Satan wants to afflict him. We must keep in mind as we read the book that we (the readers) are being allowed to see both perspectives: the perspective from heaven and the earthly one from Job's vantage point. Yet Job could not see behind the scenes as we do. He did not realize that Satan was working to get a "shot" at him.
- B. Satan's Contention:
Satan has the idea that Job worships God only because of the nice things God does for him, not because he really adores God. Hence, a question is raised: what is the motivation for Job's piety? Nevertheless, the opportunity that Satan is given to afflict Job will lead to a much more fundamental question: What is the basis of man's relationship with God?
- C. As we go through the book, keep in mind that Job did not do anything wrong to prompt this affliction. He is not suffering because of sin in his life. However, in the outworking of the story, his attitude toward God does degenerate. This attitude problem toward God is what must be corrected!

III. AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK OF JOB

See the supplement (book chart) to this session for the overall structure.¹

IV. CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE MAJOR UNITS OF THE BOOK

A. The Prologue (Ch 1–2)

1. Satan's View:

Job only worships God because of what he gets out of it. Take away the blessing and he will curse God (1:9-11).

2. Outcome: He is so miserable in his circumstances that even his wife urges him to curse God. But Satan is proven wrong: Job does not curse God (2:9-10).

B. Job's Complaint (Ch 3)

Although he does not curse God, he does curse his own existence. He is caught in the dilemma of trying to explain how all this could be happening to him. Basically he is saying, "What have I done to deserve this?"

C. The Dialogue with his Friends (Ch 4–28)

These chapters are arranged in three cycles, consisting of counsel from the friends followed by Job's response.

1. First Cycle (Ch 4–14)

a. The counsel of friends: The basic counsel of Job's friends is that he is suffering because of his personal sin (retribution theology).² Hence, their suggestion is that he needs to admit his sin and repent of it.

b. Job's response: Job is open to the notion that he may have sinned, but he requests that they tell him what it is (i.e., he admits no guilt).

2. Second Cycle (Ch 15–21)

a. The counsel of friends: The wicked suffer because they defy God.

b. Job's response: The wicked do not always suffer, but often prosper.

3. Third Cycle (Ch 22–28)

a. The counsel of friends: They plead with him to repent, so that he can be restored.

b. Job's response: He will not repent; he feels he is right in his cause.

¹For excellent discussion of the literary shape and literary features of the book, see Gregory W. Parsons, "The Structure and Purpose of the Book of Job," *BibSac* 138 (Apr-Jun 1981), 139-57; and "Literary Features of the Book of Job," *BibSac* 138 (Jul-Sep 1981), 213-29.

²"Retribution Theology" assumes an automatic connection between a deed and one's state of blessing. Hence, all suffering is caused by sin, but blessing is certain for obedience. The problem with this view is that while it is often true in the OT, it is not automatic or universally true.

D. Job's Final Statement (Ch 29–31)

At this point in the book, there is a shift toward an emphasis on Job's dispute with God. These chapters could be summarized as follows:

Ch 29 — Job longs for his past blessed state of prosperity

Ch 30 — Job laments his present state of misery

Ch 31 — Job's oath of innocence

This is a crucial section of the book, because Job's attitude is increasingly becoming heated toward God. He finds fault with God and wants to contend with Him. In this we see Job's real problem: he did not sin so as to deserve suffering, but in his suffering he finds fault with God's character and nature! In fact, he even feels he has a "legal case" to make against God, as though God could be brought to trial (note 31:35-37!). Job's problem is that he could not harmonize his suffering with God's being an impartial judge—thus, he was left to question God's character. Parsons states, "Job conceived of God as being an arbitrary and capricious Sovereign who abused His power (9:15-24; 12:13-25) and who maliciously treated innocent Job as a personal enemy."³

E. Elihu's Four Speeches (Ch 32–37)⁴

Following Job's charge against God in chapter 31, there is a delay before God's response to Job. Another friend, Elihu, is allowed to speak. But what does he add that is new? He contends that both parties are wrong. He rebukes the first three friends for their argument that Job is suffering simply as a punishment for past sin. On the other hand, he points out Job's pride. He is trying to offer an alternative explanation, but like his friends he wants to be able to tie it all neatly in a box. Elihu is *wrong* in that he still assumes Job was guilty of sin, but he is *right* that Job's attitude toward God is wrong: Job's position is fallacious for it implies that God owes man something for his righteousness.

Elihu's counsel is not satisfactory for Job. Rather, he appeals to God as his arbiter, but in a manner of shaking his fist at God and demanding an answer. Nevertheless, Elihu does pave the way for the next section by raising the issue of God's wonders in creation.

F. The Response from the LORD (Ch 38–42:6)

In the LORD's response, several points are raised and answered:

1. God is in control — yet there is more to the situation than they realize!
2. The greatness of God is revealed — which calls forth humility!
3. God operates by design — which must be accepted by faith!
4. The issue of justice (why?) — [no answer]

This last matter (that of God's justice) is not really explained. His creation is magnificent and His creative genius is splendid (which points to reasons to trust such an awesome God), but God does not try to account for His justice as though He were obligated to account for Himself. This is the key to the whole book. Throughout the book, everybody is trying to pin down

³Parsons, "The Structure and Purpose of the Book of Job," 144.

⁴ For further help on this section, see Larry J. Waters, "The Authenticity of the Elihu Speeches in Job 32–37," *BibSac* 156:621 (Jan-Mar 1999), 28-41.

"why." But this is the very thing God does not provide (He does not tell him why). Job's relationship to God is not a judicial one, and it is absurd for Job to attempt to manipulate God by a lawsuit. God will not be coerced or manipulated by Job's defiant demand for vindication because of his ethical righteousness (God virtually ignores Job's allegations of His injustice, except for 40:8).

The LORD refuses to be called into account on the matter of dealing justly with His creatures, and the question of "why" is not answered. But the "who" is more important than the "why"! To have to know the "why" almost implies that not until Job knows that will the question be settled as to whether or not God was just.

But what was Job doing in the book? Was he asking for an explanation, or was he calling God to be accountable? The bottom line of the book is that God is thoroughly in control and accountable to no one for what He does in the world.

G. The Epilogue (ch 42:7-17)

In response to the LORD's speech, Job recognizes his fault and repents (42:1-6). As a result, God graciously rewards Job with even more than he had before. God did not owe this to Job; He gave it as a free undeserved gift. That's *GRACE*!

V. THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

The book is not so much about "undeserved suffering" . . . this theme is only used to bring out more vital issues. Rather, the book is really about the basis of the proper relationship between God and man. Satan's view was certainly wrong, but so was that of Job's friends who tried to force their "retribution theology" too far. The relationship between God and man is not one in which man can simply call God into question or demand that He account for Himself. Man is not God's equal, nor is he capable of arguing with God in court. God is so wondrous in creation . . . how can man even expect to be on a level to contend with God?

All that man can do is trust in this God who created everything, not expect to have an answer for everything on this side of glory, and realize that God deals with man in grace rather than by what he deserves. Parsons summarizes the purpose of the book in these words:

"to show that the proper relationship between God and man is based solely on the sovereign grace of God and man's response of faith and submissive trust."⁵

A LESSON FOR OUR LIVES

Has God been just with you? We often want to call God's justice into question, but this is a futile matter, because we (as humans) are simply too limited in our understanding to evaluate such things. We cannot see all sides. Instead, this "justice" question obscures the real issue, which is the basis of our relationship with God. As long as I think I have the wisdom and the right to call God into question, I miss out. I hinder God from His desire to deal with me in grace. I am not qualified to judge God's ways! I would have to be someone greater than God to do this. Instead, my only alternative is to humble myself and trust Him (after all, He is sovereign and He did a good job in creation). What a need we all have for humility. Would you take a moment to pray for humility right now?

⁵Ibid., 142.