



WHEN GOOD PEOPLE SUFFER Studies in the Book of Job Lesson 2

GOD IS GREAT; GOD IS GOOD; TRAGEDY STILL HAPPENS (THE PROBLEM OF EVIL)

I. WHAT MAKES THE BOOK OF JOB GREAT?

The book's place of writing is unknown, the time of its writing is unidentified, the place where the events happened is debated and its purpose is cloudy. So what makes the book so great?

More than a book about Job's suffering, the book of Job is a theodicy (a vindication of God's goodness, justice and sovereign character in the face of the existence of suffering and evil). It is at the same time a drama, a legal discussion and charge and a literary masterpiece.

The book wrestles with the age-old question: Why do righteous men suffer, if God is a God of love and mercy? It clearly teaches the sovereignty of God and the need for man to acknowledge such.

Like a gem, the book has many facets and study may be done on one or more of these.

II. A SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

The book begins and ends with prose but the major part is poetry. Although the events actually happened, they are written of with poetic beauty. Job's three friends gave essentially the same wrong answer to the question of why the righteous suffer. To them all suffering is due to sin.

Elihu, however, declared that suffering is often the means of purifying the righteous. God's purpose, therefore, was to strip away all of Job's self-righteousness and to bring him to the place of complete trust in Him.

In the first speech, Job curses the day that he was born, insisting that life under the conditions that he must bear is not worthwhile. Because he is conscious of no wrongdoing, he sees no justice in the way he must suffer.

To this speech, Eliphaz replies that righteous people do not suffer; only the wicked are tormented in this fashion. For Job to declare himself innocent is to charge God with injustice; that a man should be more just than God is unreasonable. Eliphaz argues that in God's sight, no human being is righteous. All humans have sinned, and any suffering they must endure is a just punishment for their transgressions.

Bildad adds his support to what Eliphaz says by insisting that God does not pervert justice; neither does he ever act unrighteously.

Zophar goes even further in his accusations against Job: Job is not being punished as much as he deserves, for God is both just *and* merciful, and mercy always means treating a person better than that person deserves.

To each of these speeches, Job makes an effective reply. He challenges his accusers to point out any evil deed that he has committed. If he has failed simply because he is mortal, it is not his fault, for he was created that way. His conduct has been as good as that of his accusers.

After the first round of speeches, the cycle is repeated, with Job again making a reply after each friend speaks.

In the third cycle of speeches, only Eliphaz and Bildad speak. In Job's final reply, he makes a masterful defense of his own position, at the conclusion of which we are told, "The words of Job are ended."

Job makes three basic complaints:

1. "God does not hear me" (13:3, 24; 19:7; 23:3-5; 30:20)
2. "God is punishing me" (6:4; 7:20; 9:17)
3. "God allows the wicked to prosper" (21:7)

Job, like his three friends, is utterly committed to the then traditional view of the world - that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; that God sometimes brings "trials" or "tests" into life in order to refine a person's commitment; that redemption comes for those who maintain their fidelity during the storms of life.

What does bother Job throughout the book, however, is that the suffering he faces right now is disproportionate to any level of suffering that ought to be inflicted by God on a person, even for purposes of instruction or discipline.

The implicit commitment of the tradition was to "proportionate suffering." What Job is suffering here is disproportionate to anything he "deserved." This sense of unfairness, of disproportion, then occupies Job's mind as he decides on his verbal strategy with the friends and with God.

Now young Elihu enters the scene. The speeches of Elihu represent a further attempt to find justification for Job's affliction. Elihu admits that the arguments of the three friends have been adequately refuted by Job, but he believes he can present other ones that will show how Job has been in the wrong. He suggests that Job's suffering may be a warning so that he won't sin, and then he repeats the same arguments that the three friends made.

When God speaks unexpectedly, He addresses Job in nature poems. They picture in the most exquisite language the wonders and the grandeur of the created universe. However, as beautiful as the poems are, they do not deal with Job's problem. True, they contrast the power and wisdom of the deity with the inferior lot of human beings, but they still leave unanswered the question of why innocent people have to suffer in the manner that Job experiences. However, Job catches a glimpse of the divine perspective; and when he acknowledged God's sovereignty over his life, his worldly goods are restored to full. Satan's challenge has become God's opportunity to build up Job's life. James writes, "*Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord — that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful*" (James 5:11).

III. THE QUESTION OF WHAT WE ARE TO BELIEVE AND IMITATE

A. The Question of Normativeness

Another major question is that of how we are to take the teachings of the book. Normativeness asks the question whether a given event or statement constitutes a divinely intended norm or standard for Christian life. In this sense normativeness must be determined by whether clear Scriptures (especially in the New Testament) endorse the events or statements.

There is much in all the speeches (excepting God's and possibly Elihu's) that is contrary to other revelation. The words of Satan in Job lack Biblical approval. Similarly; those passages in which the "three friends" condemn Job, such as Eliphaz's words in Job 22:5-9, are clearly at fault (cf. Job 1:1; 32:3), even though accurately recorded. On the other hand, the words of this same Eliphaz concerning the power of God (in 5:13) are expressly approved in I Corinthians 3:19. As a result, one must avoid such an indiscriminate denial of inspired normativeness to his

speeches. Elihu's' claim that Job is being chastened by God may be off the mark but his idea of the benefit of correction through suffering is expressed in Hebrews 12:5,6.

Joseph Hontheim writes:

The Church teaches that the book was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Thus all that its author gives as historical fact or otherwise guarantees possesses unfailing Divine truth. The question, however, arises, what does the book guarantee? (a) Everything in prologue or epilogue that is the comment of the author is Divine truth; nevertheless, what is perhaps poetic ornament must not be confounded with historical verity or objective dogmatic precepts. The same authority is possessed by the utterances assigned by the poet to God. The like is true of the speeches of Eliu. Some think the speeches of Eliu are to be judged just as are those of Job and his friends. (b) The speeches of Job and his three friends have in themselves no Divine authority, but only such human importance as Job and his three friends are Personally entitled to. They have, however, Divine authority when, and in as far as, they are approved by the author expressly or tacitly. In general, such tacit approbation is to be understood for all points concerning which the disputants agree, unless the author, or God, or Eliu, shows disapproval. Thus the words of Job have in large degree Divine authority, because the view he maintains against the three friends is plainly characterized by the author as the one relatively correct. Yet much that the three friends say is of equal importance, because it is at least tacitly approved. St. Paul argues (1 Corinthians 3:19) from a speech of Eliphaz (Job 5:13) as from an inspired writing. (c) In particular places, especially where descriptions of nature are given or other secular matters are referred to, the caution prescribed by the rules of hermeneutics should be observed.

- Joseph Hontheim <http://mb-soft.com/believe/txs/job.htm>

B. The Progress of Revelation

Revelation is given from God, not all at once, but in pieces which add to our understanding and build upon each other. Job is set in a time at the dawning of Divine disclosure. Job is before the coming of Christ and the New Testament's light; before the prophets and their intimate relationship with God and before Moses and the teaching and worship instruction of the law.

This is shown by:

1. The great age he attained. He was no longer young when overtaken by his great misfortune (12:12; 30:1). After his restitution he lived one hundred and forty years longer (42:16).
2. His wealth like that of the Patriarchs, consisted largely in flocks and herds (1:3; 42:12).
3. The piece of money mentioned in 42:11 belongs to patriarchal times; the only other places in which the expression occurs are Genesis 33:19 and Joshua 24:32.
4. The musical instruments (21:12; 30:31) are only those mentioned in Genesis (Genesis 4:21; 31:27).

5. Job offered sacrifice as the father of the family (1:5), as was also the custom of the Patriarchs.

The book of Job belongs to the patriarchal dispensation, and though God's being remains the same (He is sovereign, free, just, merciful, even gracious), His salvation and plan of resurrection are seen only in shadow. To understand Job's theology (or lack of it) one must always keep that in mind.

Job evidently was not a Jew and lived outside of Palestine. He and the other characters seem to know nothing of the specifically Israelitic laws, customs and institutions. Nevertheless Job and his friends venerated the one true God. They also knew of the tradition of the Flood (22:16), and the first man, Adam (15:7 though some think this is a reference to "man" in general).

C. The Answer in the Incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ

Elihu's lament that we do not know God (36:26); Job's cries to speak to God (13:3) and, his longing for a mediator (9:33) are answered in the incarnation of Jesus Christ! He is the One Who makes the unknowable God knowable (John 1:14); and is the express image of the invisible One (Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3).

IV. JOB'S FOUR FRIENDS

A. Who They Were

1. Eliphaz

The most important of Job's four friends was Eliphaz of Teman. The name shows him to be an Edomite (Genesis 36:11, 15). The Temanites of Edom were famous for their wisdom (Jeremiah 49:7; Obadiah 9; Baruch 3:22 sq.). Eliphaz was an old man (15:10), and much older than the already elderly Job (30:1).

2. Bildad

Bildad the Shuite, seems to have belonged to Northern Arabia, for Shu was a son of Abraham by Ketura (Genesis 25:2, 6). He may have been of the same age as Job.

3. Zophar

Zophar, was probably also an Arabian. The Hebrew text calls him a Naamathite. Naama was a small town in the territory belonging to Judah (Joshua 15:41), but Zophar hardly lived there. Perhaps the preferable reading is that of the Septuagint which calls Zophar always a Minaean; the Minaeans were an Arabian tribe. Zophar was far younger than Job (cf. Job's reply to Sophar, 12:11-12; 13:1-2).

4. Elihu

Like Job, Elihu the Buzite was an Aramean; at least this is indicated by his native country, Buz, for Buz is closely connected (Genesis 22:21) with Huz. Elihu was much younger than Zophar (32:6).

B. Their Basis of Authority

1. Eliphaz – personal experience – Job 4:8, 12-16; 5:3, 27; 15:17

2. Bildad – tradition – Job 8:8-10

3. Zophar – the cold logic of his theology – Job 11:6; 20:4

4. Elihu – common sense

V. THE PROBLEM OF TRAGEDY

The story of Job raises the age-old problem of evil: If God is both good and powerful, why does he not stop evil?

In 1991, the Grammy winner for the best single was by Bette Midler. She sang a song that said from a distance the world looks green and the mountains disappear. From a distance there are no wars and poverty, and from a distance there's no reason for fighting and everything is love and beautiful. In between each verse the chorus says, "God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us from a distance."

It is rather difficult to know exactly what is meant by "*From a distance God is watching us.*" It could mean that if we could have God's perspective, then we could reach the ideal of no war and no poverty, etc. But as Bette Midler sings it you get the impression that, from a distance, God does not really know what is going on. Even worse, God does not care about what is going on; He just stays at a distance. He is not relevant to me here and now.

I will admit that there are times when that is the way it would seem to me also. As I hear of children being abused, babies being murdered in the wombs, poverty still stretching the tummies of children in so much of the world, I just wish once God would step out and say, "Make My day!" I wish He would do something!

A. The Definition of Tragedy

1. Natural evil

All events contrary to human values not involving moral decision.

2. Moral evil

All events contrary to human values involving moral decision.

I heard recently a story of a man who sexually abused his daughter, terribly beat his young boy, and mauled, beat and verbally abused his wife. But every Sunday he went to church, and at every meal he would pray, "*God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for this food.*" That story well presents what is called "The Problem of Evil."

In each of these instances, the problem comes when God no longer stays at a distance. If we believed God stayed at a distance there would be no riddle. Oh, there would still be problems, but there would be no riddle - the riddle comes because we believe, and the Bible clearly teaches, that God does not stay at a distance. He really is "up close and personal." But at that point, it gives me a problem and strangely enough, the man's prayer, as hypocritical as it might have been, expresses something of the problem.

B. The Definition of the Problem

1. God is good.

When Christians teach that God is good, the question is "then how can these bad things happen? Would a good God allow such evil?"

2. God is all powerful.

God is not only good in Christian, Moslem and Judaic theology, but God is also all-powerful. Would a good God allow such evil if He had the power to stop it?

3. Evil exists.

We believe that God is good and all-powerful and yet, still, terrible things happen. How can these terrible things happen? If one of these propositions is not true, then there is no real problem. Terrible things still happen, but there is no intellectual problem.

VI. THE PROPOSED NON-BIBLICAL SOLUTIONS

A. Deny the Goodness of God.

Those few who follow some kind of Satanist cult would be among those who would try to deny God's goodness. There are those in eastern religion that deny the goodness of God.

Eastern religion does not see reality in the same way that Christianity, Judaism and Islam do. God to them is not objective, external to us, but God is within us. They say God is in every person, and that kind of a god cannot have the attribute of pure goodness.

We not only say God is good; we say God is all good. John wrote, "*God is light and in Him is no darkness at all*" (1 John 1:5). In other words there is no dark side to God like there is to the force in Lucas's films or in the "yin and yang," the contrasting good and evil of the ancient eastern religions. To them everything has a dark side and a light side. Everything is both at the same time good and evil, and so God, or the ultimate reality, is both good and evil. Evil is simply the dark side of the force. Perhaps in another incarnation, in another way, we will see evil as really the good side.

B. Deny the Power of God.

Some have tried to solve the problem by denying the ability of God. They claim that God is good but is not powerful enough to do anything about evil. They propose what is sometimes called "process theology" or "open Theism." The idea is that God cannot know all the future, but is a changing, moving, growing Being. It is not much different from the mystery, eastern religions or the New Age. God is part of the whole evolutionistic scheme, and He is getting better, changing and processing. He is getting there, but He is not there yet.

Though there are those who would like to solve the problem of evil by denying the power of God, those who believe the Bible cannot do so. Scripture clearly teaches that God is both good and powerful.

C. Deny the Existence of Evil.

1. Eastern religion

We have already seen that many deny evil by a dualism, or by calling it "illusion." Scott Peck in his book, The People Of The Lie, proclaims that there really is such a thing as evil. He writes,

"The reality is that this world is not okay. Evil is not the figment of some medieval theologian's imagination. Auschwitz and Jonestown are actually places, they actually happened. Human evil is real." Then he talks about "personal sin" and says, "Unpleasant though it may be, that sense of personal sin is precisely that which keeps our sin from getting out of hand.... It is quite painful at times, but it is a great blessing because it is our one and only safeguard against our own proclivity for evil."

2. Christian Science

In Christian Science there is no such thing as evil. Evil is the error of mortal mind. I do not know why mortal mind is not itself evil. In that case, they believe it is an illusion.

3. Pop psychology

There is now a defense for anything and everything you do along psychological lines. You can claim some psychological disability or marred childhood.

They seem to think we are not responsible for what we do, or we can plead a collective guilt. Society somehow is really to blame.

VII. THE BIBLICAL DIRECTION FOR A SOLUTION

A. Distinctives

1. The decretive will of God (sometimes called the "efficacious" will of God).

Ultimately God is the blessed controller of all things (1 Timothy 6:15). What He has decreed will come about.

The possession of the most complete sovereignty is a necessary part of the proper conception of God and is abundantly declared in the Scriptures (e.g., Ps 50:1; 66:7; 93:1; Isa 40:15, 17; 1 Tim 6:15; Rev 11:17). The method of the divine rulership is, however, to be judged in the light of special revelation.... There is a sense, indeed, in which the sovereignty of God is absolute. He is under no external restraint whatsoever. He is the Supreme Dispenser of all events. All forms of existence are within the scope of His dominion. And yet this is not to be viewed in any such way as to abridge the reality of the moral freedom of God's responsible creatures or to make men anything else than the arbiters of their own eternal destinies. God has seen fit to create beings with the power of choice between good and evil. He rules over them in justice and wisdom and grace.

This is the whole tenor of the Scriptures and the plain declaration of many passages (e.g., Deut 10:17; Job 36:5; Acts 10:34-35; Rom 2:6; Col 3:25; 1 Peter 1:17).

Thus understood the sovereignty of God is the great ground of confidence for His people, and the proper basis upon which to urge sinners to repentance.

– The New Unger's Bible Dictionary

2. The preceptive will of God - Romans 2:18; Acts 22:14.

This is God's will that He has made known. Men may know it through creation, conscience and revealed truth (Romans 1:1-2:9). These are the "commands" of God to men. This Will may be broken, disobeyed and thwarted. All men disobey the preceptive will of God at times. Scripture calls it "sin" (Romans 3:23).

3. The desired will of God.

The will of desire includes those events that God wants to come about, but are conditioned on the choices of His moral creatures. This "will" can be thwarted because God does not coerce the free choices of His creatures. He desires all men to be saved, but some will choose to reject Him and will elect to spend eternity apart from Him (1 Timothy 2:4).

4. The permissive will of God.

God permits many events which He does not restrain (Deuteronomy 8:2; 2 Chronicles 32:31; Hosea 4:17; Romans 1:24-28; Acts 14:16). God is not the responsible cause of sin.

5. The responsibility of man.

Speaking of the "will" ISBE says,

WILL: The words employed and passages cited show clearly that man is always regarded as a responsible being, free to will in

harmony with the divine will or contrary to it. This is further shown by the various words denoting refusal . "Ye will not come to me, that ye may have life" (John 5:40). So with respect to temptation. We may even choose and act deliberately in opposition to the will of God. Yet God's counsel, His will in its completeness, ever prevails, and man, in resisting it, deprives himself of the good it seeks to confer upon him. – International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia,

The sovereignty of God and the freedom of man are both taught in Scripture. The two lines of teaching are like two railroad tracks which are parallel. They seem to meet on the horizon. Perhaps God will resolve this tension for us in eternity. Here we simply believe both without understanding how they are to be resolved.

B. Definition

- 1. He creates and causes - Genesis 1:1**
- 2. He sustains - Psalm 97:1**
- 3. He acts - Ephesians 1:18-19; Psalm 24:8**
- 4. He plans the future - Revelation 1:8; 1 Peter 1:20; Acts 2:23; Matthew 24:3; Hebrews 9:27**

C. The Origin of Evil

1. Moral - Isaiah 14; Genesis 3; Romans 5:12

God is not the author of sin (Genesis 1-3). God created the world, but He created it perfect. When Adam and Eve came from the breath of God, they came without sin. There was no darkness in this world, there was no evil, there were no bad things happening to good people; God created it perfect.

Then the tempter came and man chose to sin. It was because of man's sin that man fell. Because of sin, death came into the world (cf. Romans 5:12) and with it all the disease and tragedies that we now know.

2. Natural - Romans 8:19-22

Because man, who was made to have dominion over the world, was brought down, God brought down nature in order to keep the balance. All of nature turned as part of the curse. It no longer yielded gladly, and it was by the curse of hard labor that man would get his bread. It was through difficulty that there would be childbirth. All the problems of the world came as a consequence of sin - death, disease, natural calamity, moral and natural evil. God is not the responsible author of disaster.

D. The Existence of Evil Was Inherent in the Risky Gift of Freedom.

In creating us as moral agents, God ran the risk of freedom (as C.S. Lewis puts it). God ran the risk of not making us robots, automatons. He wanted free, choosing, willing people. God desired our love, but a love that is forced is not love at all. God ran the risk of His moral agents choosing against Him as Satan did, and as Adam and Eve did. Because of the solidarity of the human race we participate in that choice.

E. Actions Have Consequences.

We need to distinguish between punishment and consequences. Much evil, especially natural tragedy, is a consequence of events and choices that have been made, not a direct punishment from God. Much of evil is simply natural conse-

quences in life. Once having entered into a fallen world, as we did in Genesis 3, we now live in a world where actions have consequences. We live in a chain where we are linked to all other human beings. The poet says, "*Ask not for whom the bell tolls, (when there is a death) it tolls for thee,*" because that death affects you and it affects me.

F. The Worst Thing About Sin Is That the Innocent Suffer with the Guilty.

Sin would not nearly be so bad if we only had the consequences of our own actions brought upon us. But the innocent suffer with the guilty. For example, I do not think AIDS was permitted by God as a punishment on homosexuals and drug abusers. Regardless, however, of how we answer that question, we cannot use the fact that innocent babies get AIDS as evidence against the idea. All the fact that innocent babies get AIDS tells us is that the innocent suffer with the guilty in this life. That is one of the worst things about sin.

G. This Life is Not the Place of Reward or Punishment.

All the hope of the believer is wrapped up in the Second Coming of the Messiah. We look forward to that blessed hope. That is when God is going to make all things right. I love the statement by Dr. Karl Meninger when he said,

People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered.

Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.

People really need help, but they may attack you if you help them. Help people anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked through the teeth.

Give the world the best you've got and then remember, - because it is the great secret of the Christian - there is a God and someday every loose end will be tied up.

As I Chronicles 16:33 says, "*God will come in judgment.*" God is just. He will reward. He will punish.

H. God Gives Enough Evidence That the Believing Heart May Have Certainty.

But He never gives so much evidence that the element of faith is eliminated. God is not going to prove or vindicate Himself so completely that He overwhelms the mind and coerces the will. He is too much of a gentleman; He will not break down the door of man's heart.

I. If God Did Away with All Evil Tonight Who Would Exist Tomorrow?

People often want God to do away with all evil but their own, but if God would act now in total justice, none would stand.

J. Evil is Not a Thing.

Evil is not a "something" like a house or a tree are things. Yet it is real. Evil is more an absence in something that is good. When good is missing from something, that is evil. It is like a parasite that cannot exist except as a hole in something that should be solid. If a person is missing a growth it is not bad; the growth should not have been there in the first place. If a man is missing sight, that is evil. If he is missing kindness of heart and respect for human life it can mean murder.

Evil is more like a bad relationship between things that are either good or morally neutral in themselves. A person may use a hammer as a tool or as a weapon. The relationship between things can be wrong. God did not "create" evil as He created other things and beings. A moral agent chose a bad relationship that lacked worship and love for the God who created Him.

K. We Must See Things from an Eternal Perspective.

Because we cannot see a purpose in an action or event does not mean God does not have one. He showed His purpose with Job and Joseph. As Joseph said, "*But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive*" (Gen 50:20). Or as the song goes:

*If we could see beyond today as God doth see,
Then all the clouds would roll away, the shadows flee.
O'er present griefs we ne'er would fret
Each sorrow we would soon forget
For many joys are waiting yet
For you and me.*

The worst evil in history was also the most wonderful event. Christ's death on the cross was a hideous injustice against not only an innocent man but against the Lord of Glory. But that death was the payment for the sins of the whole world, and provides the basis of our salvation (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 John 2:1).

L. We Must Be Content with God Himself.

God never gives a full answer to the problems and the questions related to evil. What He does do is say, "*I am enough for you.*" The psalmist concludes his discussion of the prosperity of the wicked by crying out to God: "*Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you*" (Psalms 73:25). The solution to the problem is not a syllogism or a set of propositions to answer the questions of our minds as much as a relationship to God that satisfies the heart. What satisfies is to know the God who is someday going to make all things right, who someday is going to show Himself both good and powerful as well as wondrously wise. When we come to the point where God is all we really have in heaven or in earth, we will find that we have a relationship that by itself solves the problem of evil. The answer to the question of evil is not so much a reason to be understood as it is a relationship to be enjoyed.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Read lesson 2 and tell why you think the book of Job is great.

Read Job 11 - 20 and answer the following questions:

1. Compare Zophar's comments in verses 11:7-12 with I Corinthians 2:6-13. How does one discover the deep things of God?

2. In general, what promises of God does Zophar speak in verses 11: 13-19?

3. From Job 19:1-29 list some of the ways Job describes God's actions against him. Which of these seems to you would have been the most difficult to bear?

4. In the response of faith found in verses 19:23-27 Job describes God as his "Redeemer."
 - a. What did that mean to Job?

 - b. What does it mean to you?

 - c. What is your favorite title for God? Why?

5. How is God's power described in Job 12:13-15?

6. Who did Eliphaz claim accused Job? (15:6)

7. How did Job describe his comforters? (16:2)

8. How does Job describe God's attack on him? (16:12-14)

9. Why was Bildad indignant toward Job? (18:2-3)

10. How did Job's brothers, friends and relatives treat him? (19:13-20)

11. How does Zophar describe the end of the wicked? (20:12-19)