

## **What does the book of Job teach us about suffering?**

Have you ever looked at a big impressive car and wondered what it would be like to drive it around your town? Six years ago, when my life appeared to go badly wrong, a good friend told me it was “time to take my Christian theology on a test drive”.

I was a Bible teacher for 25 years in UK and Sudan. My study of God and application of the Bible into daily life, had always *‘looked’* good. What would it *‘live’* like now in the ups and downs, *especially in the downs*, of every day life? During 2001 my relatively good health disappeared. These last eight years what I believe – and what I used to be able to preach – has been severely tested.

I reread the book of Job several times. I have spent hours thinking it over in God’s presence, often in physical pain. I confess I have been disappointed at what God seems to be doing with my life. I have become frustrated at my inability to do what I knew God had called me to. However, the facts today are, instead of pastoring an exciting church in an African capital city, I am constantly spending time with doctors in hospitals.

I discovered that the book of Job is mainly about God. I have learned that my suffering – my pain, misery and loss – is largely about God too. What is my gracious Heavenly Father doing with the life I have trusted over to Him?

Probably the oldest book in our Bible shows my Father dealing with a wealthy, God-fearing, sheikh named Job. It raises two essential applications for us:

1. Why do we worship God?
2. What happens to that worship when God does not do what we think He should?

In Job 1&2 the ever rebellious Satan disputes the words and works of God. He challenges Job’s motives for fearing God. He doubts Job’s honest morality. Trying to prove God wrong Satan removes Job’s wealth and health. In chapters 3-37, four men speak with Job about his

desperate suffering. In chapters 38-41 God Himself speaks. Chapter 42 describes the results in everyone's lives.

I submit to you twelve things I have learned about suffering during my living with God and the book of Job in recent years.

**1. Suffering is for heaven's purposes** Job 1:6-8, 2:1-3

Our God reigns over all! We are given a glimpse of one of heaven's council meetings in God's presence. We discover even angels and spirit-beings are fully accountable to our great creator God. Although Job never knew any of this (as far as we know), everything that happened in the story subsequently did so because of an exchange of views started by God at this council.

When we see or experience suffering it is good to keep in mind there may be purposes God has which are not apparent to us. A good question to ask is: 'What is going on in heaven to make this happen?'

**2. There is such a thing as 'undeserved suffering'** Job 1:1-3, 1:5, 1:8, 1:22, 2:3

Suffering is not prevented by religious observance or by material wealth. God's protection of people or things we hold dear cannot be bought with any kind of currency. Job regularly presented his family to God acting as a priest. Godly habits are always important. But being right in the eyes of God does not make any person (or others he/she prays for) immune from suffering. It is wrong to believe that if we are righteous we will necessarily prosper in things of this world.

**3. Suffering really hurts!** Job 2:12,13

When God created humankind He was pleased with the humanity He had made, Genesis 1:31. God knew we could feel physical and emotional pain, yet He was pleased with the good results of His creating.

Job lost his livestock to rustlers and a lightning strike. He lost his adult children to a hurricane haboob. He who was blessed with wealth and health became bereft of both. This hurt him deeply within. Outside, his infested skin acutely hurt too. His suffering was visible to others.

Job's wife became overwhelmed, frustrated and angry. It is incredibly hard to watch a loved-one suffer and feel helpless to prevent it. She urged Job to do what he knew was wrong in God's sight, Job 2:9;1:5. They became at odds with each other, adding to both their pain.

Job's lament shows his deep agony and bitterness of soul, 3:1-3. His situation seemed hopeless, 14:13. Suffering brought loneliness to Job even though 'friends' were with him, 19:13-21. It was so hard for him. Yet we know he was still blessed and actually being used by God!

#### **4. Suffering is under God's strict control** Job 1:12, 2:6

God holds all ultimate power. God puts everything Job had into Satan's hands, but He sets limits to what Satan can do. The Lord permits so much, but no more. Satan is first forbidden to physically harm Job. Then he must let him live.

God is sovereign. God could intervene to stop suffering any time. When He chooses not to, it is because there is a higher purpose. Our Lord Jesus refused to call angels to save Him from the cross because He lived and died for much more than His own physical wellbeing, Matthew 4:5-7; 27:41-43.

#### **5. Suffering comes from God's hand** Job 1:21; 2:10; 19:6, 19:21; 42:8

The raiding parties, lightning strike and wind were all Satan's work for which God was willing. Ultimately they came from the Lord. God said to Satan: "...*you* incited *me* against him", Job 2:3 N.I.V. (*italics mine*). Satan becomes the hand of God, 2:5,6. Job recognised this, 6:4; 12:9; 13:21; 16:7; 19:21; 23:2; 27:2; 30:11. The narrator confirms it, 42:11.

When Satan struck Job the sheikh felt the hand of God. Peter and the disciples eventually discerned God's hand in the awful crucifixion of the Lord Jesus, Acts 2:22-23, 32. Paul knew God's gift during his debilitating ministry preparation, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

To say 'suffering comes from Satan *and not from God*' offers no comfort to anyone. It implies Satan has taken over control of the world: God is no longer able to restrain him!

I have learned to believe God runs every day of my life for me and all around me, even while I suffer, Psalm 139:16. God works discreetly – so I cannot always tell what He is doing. I do know God tests people. I do know God is holy, wise, loving and perfectly able. The pain God gives is the pain of a surgeon's scalpel, not a torturer's tools. Our Lord Jesus said "...It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell", Matthew 5:29,30 N.I.V.

#### **6. Suffering reveals why we love God** Job 1:9-11

God wanted to demonstrate to Satan Job's inner motives. Did they match up to his outward appearance as a man of God? Satan asked, "Would Job worship you if he got nothing out of it?", Job 1:9 G.N.B. What is inside of us is often seen on the outside when we suffer. Usually those most intimate with us get the best view. We show what we really are when we are reduced to nothing but existence. Do we serve God for what we get or simply for who He is? Are we 'free-rice Christians', or 'good-job Christians', or 'secure-home Christians'?

Self-serving worship is not really worship at all. It is idolatry. It breaks the first and second commandments, Exodus 20:2-4. God knows inner integrity produces consistently right behaviour. Suffering purges the Christian of impure motives. Job passed his test more than once, Job 1:22; 2:3; 2:10. When Christ is our only treasure then to die is total gain, Philippians 1:21.

#### **7. Suffering can be accepted worshipfully** Job 1:20; 2:10

By deliberate faith let God be God for every event in and around your life. Faith in the caring providence of God is not fatalism. Whatever happens "...may the name of the Lord be praised" because He is still worthy! Job 1:21. Trust the God we *do* know for everything we *don't* understand. Job was able to look beyond this life to the next. "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him...", 13:15 K.J.V. Suffering is only for this life after all. "I know that my Redeemer lives...", 19:25-27 N.I.V. "...He knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold", 23:10 N.I.V.

Suffering can be faced without losing your own convictions. We can engage in honest but respectful conversation – even argument – with God, Job 13:20-22; 23:3-5; 40:3-5. Remember though, God is always right!

#### **8. Suffering is misunderstood by sincere people** Job 42:7-9

The end of the book tells us God was not impressed with Job's 'comforters'! Their theology could be neat and tidy, with no loose ends, and no exceptions, because the comforters were not the ones suffering!

If I may summarise nine chapters in two short phrases: *Suffering is a retribution for sin*, said Eliphaz, 4:7-9, 17; and Bildad, 8:3-4. *You cannot be righteous before God – you show pride now by even suggesting it!* said Zophar, 11:4-5. All three looked for Job to repent and be restored. Job alone wondered if there was a deeper reason for his suffering. Job's growing anger with his friends and his situation comes through in his answers to their repeated arguments. He may have been pleased that Elihu at least tried to answer some of his questions! Job 32-37. Repentance is not always the answer. Different possibilities must be explored.

Christians need to learn the grace of receiving both good and bad happenings from the Lord's gentle but firm hand, Job 1:20-21;42:1-6.

#### **9. Suffering shows the greatness and graciousness of God** Job 38-41

The book of Job “does not set out to answer the problem of suffering but to proclaim a God so great that no answer is needed, for it would transcend the finite mind if given”.<sup>1</sup> God does what He does *always* for His own sake, Isaiah 46:9-10; 48:10-11. Job worshipped God because God was God. God was worthy of worship no matter what. God had saved him from sinful self-centredness and helped him to a God-centred attitude. God commended Job for this, Job 1:20-22; 2:3; 2:10; 42:7.

No answer is given to ‘why?’ innocent suffer, or ‘how long?’ it takes God to intervene. Instead focus is placed on God’s own character. God’s speeches focus on Himself and His actions. Job’s questions are not specifically answered, but it does not seem to matter now. Job is refocused on God Himself. God’s power is incontrovertible. God’s wisdom is inexplicable. God has chosen to allow a degree of freedom such as introduces the possibility of evil. God is not always ‘comfortable’. The world is more complex than our neat and tidy orthodoxy allows. Keep in mind human ignorance before the incomprehensible goodness of God, Job 40:2-3.

#### **10. Suffering is an opportunity for God to speak** Job 38-41

Job wanted God to speak but he did not really seem to expect it, 31:35. Out of the storm God spoke an enthralling view of Himself. He spoke when He thought it appropriate – in His own time. By speaking of the created order and how He had brought it about, God seems to imply: ‘Job, I am still in control and I know what I am doing. That, my servant Job, is all you need to know. You know nothing about running this world compared to Me. Keep your confidence in Me. I will never let you down’. True worshippers have hearts tenaciously focused upon God.

#### **11. Suffering develops our perseverance** James 5:10,11

God is full of compassion and mercy. While suffering certainly stretched Job’s faith to its limits, in spite of everything he held on to God. Job did not always feel God’s presence. He positively trusted Him for it. He knew he did not need his body to see and enjoy his God, Job 19:25-27.

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<sup>1</sup> Illustrated Bible Dictionary (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press) 1980, Volume 2, page 792.

Sometimes the hedge God provides around us can seem like a prison to us! 1:9,10; 3:23. Job's 'fear of God' was the source of his developing wisdom, 1:1; 1:8-9; 2:3. Unmerited pain, while not understood, can be accepted from God's hand. To control our own thoughts and feelings properly we must give full regard to who God actually is. Job knew that gold in his heart and his conscience was worth much more than gold in his pocket! 23:10.

## 12. **Suffering points us to the cross of Jesus**

God became the only truly innocent Man ever. As Jesus He once suffered the penalty of sin for the entire world He Himself created. The image of the invisible God is seen on Calvary's cross, Isaiah 53:10; Colossians 1:15. He demonstrated unbelievable love for us by dying in our place, Romans 5:8.

"And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen". 1 Peter 5:10,11.

### **Discussion guide**

*Using this chapter and Scriptures quoted:*

1. "I discovered that the book of Job is mainly about God".

Why is this focus important?

When we suffer, where do we often put our focus and attention?

2. "A good question to ask is: 'What is going on in heaven to make this happen?'"

Why is this a good question?

Consider Job 1:6-8; 2:1-3

2 Kings 6:15-18

Ephesians 1:3; Ephesians 1:18-22; Ephesians 6:12

3. Many people, including some of Job's comforters, believe *wrongly* that suffering comes to someone always as a result of their disobedience to God. Job 1:22; Job 4:7-8.

Explain how Jesus' words in John 9:1-3 challenge this wrong view.

Describe Job's difficulties in the light of Jesus' words here. (Apply to yourself as well!)

4. "Jesus lived and died for much more than His own physical wellbeing".

How do you think Jesus was able to do this?

Does this give any practical guidance for sufferers today?

Think about Hebrews 3:1-2; Hebrews 12:1-4.

5. Explain how Job 2:10 helps you understand that suffering comes from the hand of God.

Also consider Paul in 2 Corinthians 13:7-10

James 1:2-5; James 1:12

1 Peter 1:6-9; 1 Peter 4:12-13

6. What stops you from coming to the same view as Job in 23:10?

"...He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I will come forth as gold".