

JOB: THE HARDEST QUESTION

by Ray C. Stedman

The gripping and challenging book of Job is perhaps one of the most fascinating books of the Old Testament, and it begins a new division in the scriptures. The books from Genesis to Esther are all narrative books, and are vitally meaningful to us as living parables, as types worked out in actual history by which we can see what is going on in our own lives.

Job begins another section -- the poetical books of the Bible -- which also includes Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and the little book of Lamentations, tucked in behind Jeremiah. Job is a great poem. Some have said that it is perhaps even the greatest poem in all literature. Perhaps nothing that Shakespeare has written exceeds this book in beauty of expression. It is admired everywhere as one of the most beautiful writings that man has ever known. But it is more than an expressive, dramatic writing; it has a very great message, as we shall see.

It is a drama, an epic drama much like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the poems by Homer from the Greek world. But the book of Job is also history. Job was an actual, living person and these events actually took place, but God recounts them for us in this beautiful style so that we might have an answer to the age-old, haunting question, "Why does apparently senseless tragedy strike men?" Any time you get into difficulties it is well to turn to the book of Job. Here is a man who experienced an agony of human despair and desolation of spirit which accompanied the apparently meaningless, senseless tragedies that came into his life.

Now, the ultimate answer to that question is given right at the beginning of the book. At the opening we are handed certain program notes that explain to us something about the drama, something which even the actors themselves are not permitted to know. The answer given is that senseless suffering arises out of Satan's continual challenge to the government of God.

So, as the book opens, we find God meeting with the angelic creation. Among them is Satan, who strides in sneering and swaggering, convinced that self-interest is the only real motive for human behavior. Satan's philosophy is that the question "What's in it for me?" is the only accurate explanation for why people do anything.

And here, in the presence of God, he asserts that anyone who claims that human beings act from any other motive is simply a religious phony; furthermore, he claims he can prove it. God says, rather patiently, "All right, we'll test your theory." Then he selects the man Job to be the proving ground.

In World War II at the opening of the war between Japan and the United States, it looked as though this conflict would be staged in the Pacific Ocean -- very likely the islands of Hawaii, for the battle began at Pearl Harbor. But very early in the war, as you will remember, events took a sudden startling turn and without a word of warning the whole theater of battle shifted abruptly to the South Pacific. For the first time, Americans began to hear of strange names of islands, like "Guadalcanal" and others. There, in those quiet, obscure, out-of-the-way corners of the earth, the greatest powers on earth were locked in mortal combat. The islands became the battleground for the great fight between empires.

And something like this happened in the story of Job. Here is a man going about his private affairs, unaware that he has suddenly become the center of God's attention. For the time being all of God's activity has focused upon him, and he has become the battleground for a conflict between God and Satan in which God is planning to pull the rug out from under Satan, and to reveal him as the phony that he is. Job is that battleground, and Satan immediately moves in with shock troops.

In chapter 1 we read that, one by one, the props are pulled out of Job's life. It is as though some Western Union telegram boy delivers a series of messages to Job about terrible catastrophes. Hard on the heels of the first comes another one, and the messages keep coming in. First, all Job's oxen have been taken by enemy

raids, and then all his asses have been decimated. Next, word comes that his sheep have been killed by a terrible electric storm, and crowding in after that is the news that his great herd of camels, true wealth in the oriental world, has been wiped out in a natural catastrophe. Then comes the heartrending news that his seven sons and three daughters were together in one home enjoying a birthday celebration when a great tornado hit and the house was demolished. All of his children were killed in one fatal blow.

Job takes it all in stride. At the end of chapter 1 his response to this terrible series of tragic, senseless accidents is:

"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the LORD gives, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." {Job 1:21 RSV}

I wonder if we would have responded that way? Satan is somewhat taken aback, so he asks God to change the rules of the game. Satan has decided to attack Job more directly and petitions God for the right to strike Job's own body. This God grants. Without warning, Job is suddenly stricken with a series of terrible boils, or carbuncles.

There was a time in my life, during a period of about a year and a half, when I had some twenty-five boils on my body, though no more than two or three at one time. Since then I have had a deep sympathy for dear old Job. There is nothing more aggravating than a painful boil which is not relieved by any kind of medication. You can only grit your teeth and endure agony until the boil comes to a head, and heals itself.

Consider how Job is stricken with these from the top of his head to the sole of his foot. He hardly knows what to do, but is determined to wait it out. As the malady continues, his wife is the one whose faith succumbs. She turns on him and says, "Are you still holding fast to your integrity? Why don't you curse God and die?" Job has to stand alone, but he is determined to be faithful. Then comes the final test, when he receives a visit from three of his friends.

At this point the whole book slightly shifts its focus. We now are no longer looking only at Job but also at his controversy with these three friends, and their discourse occupies the major part of the book. From their human (very human) point of view, they attempt to answer that same haunting question, "Why do senseless tragedies afflict men?" The major part of the book, written in beautifully poetic language, records the attempts by these men to come to an answer. And the three friends' answers are all the same. They answer the question of Job's problems with smug, dogmatic assurances that only one explanation is possible: he has committed some awful sin. They try to break down Job's defenses with arguments.

Now, they are not necessarily wrong in their explanation. There are tragic events -- catastrophes, heartache, pain, and suffering -- which do occur because of sin. Any time that we violate the laws of God's universe, including the laws of health, there is an immediate and sometimes violent physical reaction and much suffering comes from that. But the problem in his friends' arguments -- and their evil -- lay in their dogmatic assertion that this is the only explanation possible for all kinds of suffering.

They each take three rounds with Job. Each of them presents three arguments, nine arguments in all, and each plays the same tune. They try various approaches. First they try sarcasm and irony. Then they appeal to Job's honesty. Then they accuse him of specific crimes and misdeeds. Finally they act hurt and go away, miffed and sulking, pridefully appealing to Job's conscience not to insult them any more. All the time they are attacking his integrity with the argument that if God is indeed just, then the righteous are always blessed and the wicked always suffer; therefore, if an individual is suffering, it must be because there is something wrong in his life. This is their argument. To these men, the explanation is a simple matter of cause and effect and is quite logical. It is neat and tidy and explains everything -- that is, unless you happen to be the sufferer.

At first Job is slightly irritated with these friends. But then he becomes angry and, finally, sarcastic. In the opening lines of his reply, he delivers a cutting piece of irony: "I am sure you alone are the people and wisdom is going to die with you." (Job 12:2) "You've got all the answers, you've solved all the problems, you know everything. So there's no use talking to you any longer!" With bitter sarcasm he replies that their explanation of his suffering is in error. Resentful, he openly entreats them to understand. He says he can't confess sin

because he is genuinely unaware of anything he has done that has offended God. Moreover, he can't believe in justice any longer because their arguments that the wicked always suffer simply are not true. He points out that many people who are very wicked, notoriously wicked, are prospering and flourishing and living in ease, and nothing horrible is happening to them.

Furthermore, he says, he doesn't know what to do because God won't listen to him; he doesn't even have a chance to plead his case before God, and he complains that God hides from him and cannot be found. Eventually Job actually shouts at these friends in the turmoil of his confusion, bewilderment, anger, hurt, and frustration. He says he is afraid of this God, who is not the God he has known. He doesn't know what has happened to this dear old friend whom he could always rely upon. Job has taken a strange turn in his attitude now that these awful things are happening to him. He is uncertain what to think or say.

The glorious thing about this dear man is that throughout the whole book he is utterly and completely honest. Confused and bewildered and puzzled by what is happening, he simply blurts out his thoughts. He refuses to admit things that he cannot accept: "All these pat answers don't help at all!" In his desolation he expresses in various ways the ultimate cry of the human spirit. Some wonderful verses emerge from this discourse by Job. Stripped as he is to his very soul, he cries out again and again with some of the deepest expressions of the human heart. In chapter 9 he says of God,

**For he is not a man, as I am, that I might answer him,
that we should come to trial together. {Job 9:32 RSV}**

In Hebrew, his words are literally,

**Would that there were an umpire between us,
oh that there were a daysman, a mediator between us
who might lay his hand upon us both. (Job 9:32-33)**

That is the cry of a heart that recognizes that God is higher and greater and richer and holier than man, and man can't reach him. It is the cry for a mediator to come between them.

Then in chapter 14 comes another expression out of this man's faithful heart:

**If a man die, shall he live again?
All the days of my service I would wait,
till my release should come. (Job 14:14)**

"If I knew that after I die I would live again, I would gladly wait until that time to argue my case before God!" "If a man die, shall he live again?" This great cry -- the question uttered by so many -- wells up from the depths of this man's desolation and suffering.

Then in chapter 16 Job cries out,

**Even now, behold, my witness is in heaven,
and he that vouches for me is on high. {Job 16:19 RSV}**

Earlier he had cried out for a mediator: "Oh, that I might have somebody step in between me and God." Now at last, born of his desperation, "I realize now that the only one who can adequately argue my case for me is God himself. If any cause of mine is going to be fairly presented before God, God himself has to do it."

In chapter 19 comes another distressed cry, in which he sounds this note of awful intensity:

**"Oh that my words were written!
Oh that they were inscribed in a book!
Oh that with an iron pen and lead
they were graven in the rock for ever!" {Job 19:23- 24RSV}**

That prayer was fulfilled in this record, the book of Job. Then, at last, a ray of light shines in his darkness:

**"For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then from my flesh ["in my flesh," in the Hebrew] I shall see God." (Job 19:25, 26)**

Out of the dark, deep distress of this man come these cries which find their fulfillment in the coming of Jesus Christ. He came to be mediator. He came to give assurance that man shall live again. He came to stand between man and God. He came to stand in the flesh upon the earth that man might see him face-to-face.

Now comes the final blow to Job, after all these so-called friends have had their chance with him and have tried to beat him down their arguments pounding him again and again like a club. Poor Job -- bruised, defeated, puzzled, bewildered, and confused -- now meets with a young man who happened to be standing there all along but who is only now interjected into the picture. His name is Elihu. Speaking for youth, he stands up to say, "You are all wrong. You friends of Job are wrong because you accuse him unjustly, and Job is wrong because he blames God for his difficulty. He is accusing God in order to exonerate himself." Elihu points out the weaknesses in both arguments but still offers nothing positive to answer the question of Job's misery.

But suddenly the Lord himself answers Job. In a whirlwind's fury he comes to him and says, "Do you want to debate, Job? You have been saying that you want some answers to your questions and that I have been hiding and am not willing to debate with you. Do you want to debate your case? All right. First, let me see your qualifications. I have a list here of forty questions I would like to ask you, to see if you are competent to understand problems. These are very simple problems, very simple questions, and if you are able to handle these ABC's, then perhaps you are able to debate with me the questions you have in your heart."

Then, in chapters 38 through 40, you have one of the most remarkable passages in all of the Bible. God takes Job on a tour of nature and asks him question after question about Job's ability to deal with this kind of thing or that kind of thing in nature. Gradually these three chapters draw the picture of a vastly complicated, intricately intertwined universe for which is required a tremendous superhuman mind to direct all these activities, to keep life in balance and to answer all the questions that the Lord is asking Job to answer.

At the end of this overwhelming display of the wisdom of God, Job falls down on his face and says:

**"I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees thee;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes." {Job 42:5- 6 RSV}**

God's essential argument is that life is too complicated for simple answers. If you are demanding that God come up with simple answers to these deep and complicated problems, you are asking him to do more than you are able to understand. He is simply saying that only God can adequately deal with the answers to these kinds of questions. Therefore, man must take the position of trusting him -- not arguing with him. God has displayed in the most amazing way his ability to work out complicated situations while keeping human life and the life of the entire world -- with all their tremendously involved complexities -- in beautiful balance. Now if you really see that, then you must trust God to work out these complicated problems of life.

Job, overwhelmed by the vast might and wisdom and majesty of God, falls on his face, repents, and learns the lesson that God wants him to learn. Only God has the right to use men for whatever purpose he desires. In other words, God does not exist for man but man exists for God. God is not a glorified bell-boy at whom we can snap our fingers and have him run up asking, "May I take your order?" We exist for him. We are God's instruments for the working out of his purposes, some of which are so vastly complicated they are quite beyond our ability to understand. There are many questions which simply cannot be answered because our calculating machinery is so inadequate.

The last of the book is a beautiful picture of what James calls the tender mercies of God toward Job (Jas 5:11). God says to Job, "Now I want you to pray for your friends -- these three dear men, so stubborn, so sure that they had all the answers, so well meaning, so sincere, so dedicated, but such utter blunderers. Pray for them. Job."

Then God said to Job, "How many sheep did you have?" Job said, "Seven thousand." God said, "All right, I will give you fourteen thousand. How many oxen did you have?" And he said, "Five hundred." God replied, "I'll give you a thousand. How many camels?" "Three thousand." "All right, Job, you will have six thousand camels. How many asses did you have?" "Five hundred." "I'll give you a thousand. How many sons and daughters?" "Seven sons and three daughters." "All right, you will have seven sons and three daughters more, doubled. Twice as many. Seven sons and three daughters in glory and seven sons and three daughters on earth." God restored twice as much to Job and he lived the rest of his life in blessedness and happiness. The account closes with the words,

And Job died, and old man, and full of days. {Job 42:17 RSV}

Now the remarkable thing about this book is the answer we are given: the fact that the backdrop to human suffering is the age-long conflict of Satan's challenge to God's righteous government of the universe. This answer is never given to Job, at least while he lives. At the beginning of the book you find God, Satan, and Job. At the end of the book, Satan has faded out of the picture entirely and God stands before Job with his arms akimbo, saying, "All right, I am responsible. Any questions?" The great lesson of the book is that there are times when we cannot be told the whole picture. There are times when God does not adequately explain life to us. There are times when we must trust that not all suffering occurs because we are bad, but because it can also be the source of some final good. The deepest note in the book may be struck when, out of the desolation of his heart and yet with the Spirit of God within him urging him on to faith in the midst of his bewilderment and confusion, Job says,

But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold. {Job 23:10 RSV}

That is the lesson of this book. Life is too complicated for us to handle alone. It gets so involved that we can't even be given some of the answers at times, but God is saying, "If you just take a look at all the problems that I keep solving on the very simplest levels of life and which even then are far beyond your ability to cope with, can't you trust me to work this one out as well?" In Romans Paul rejoices, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28)

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for this look into Job's heart. Thank you for recording for us the struggles of this dear man as he frankly, openly, and honestly voices his doubts, airs his grievances, addresses you with his complaints. Lord, we hear ourselves, in our irksome petulance crying out to you, blaming you for our circumstances, unwilling to believe that you have a purpose behind them and are able to work them out. Lord, teach us to rest in you through the great and wonderful revelation that in every circumstance we are privileged to be instruments in the working out of victory over the enemy of man; to demonstrate once and for all that the only life worth living is a life lived by faith. We pray in your name. Amen.

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